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44 Western

MAGAZINE

GUNSMOKE SWALLOWS AN EMPIRE

SMASHING FRONTIER NOVEL

by CLIFF BISBEE

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44 Western
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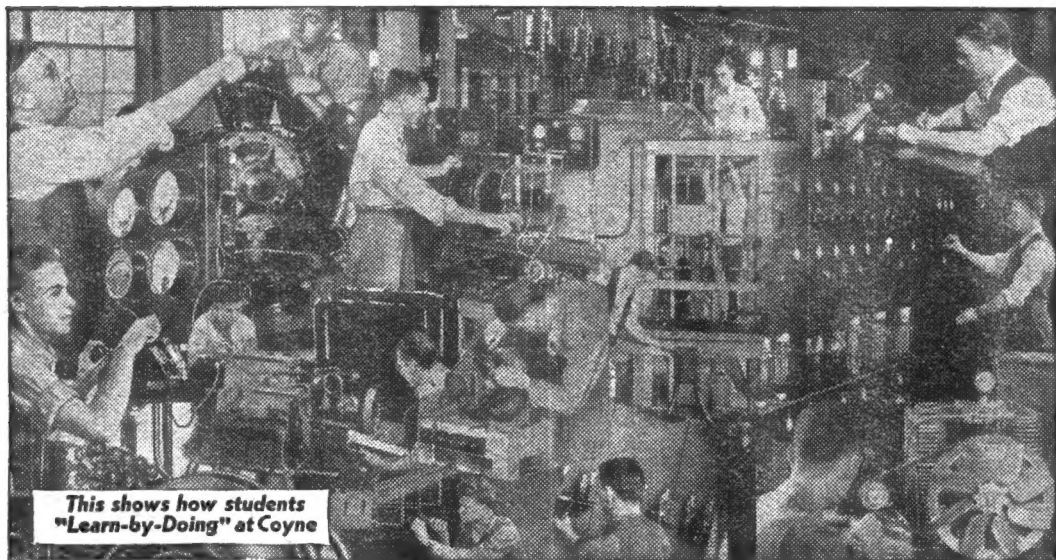
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★.44 TALK★

THE other day we received a letter from our friend Jack, who runs a small cattle outfit down in Arizona. From his range, on a nice night, you can see the lights of old Lincoln blinking under the stars, or, if you're so minded, perhaps you can listen for the ghostly hoof-beats of Billy the Kid as he gallops along his spectral trail.

Such romantic things, however, are far from Jack's thoughts, especially at the present time. For he's no dude rancher; he raises beef-cattle for market, and on how successfully he does it depends the number of war-bonds he can buy, and what sort of a spread his two brothers, now in active service, can come home.

While we always like to print letters from Westerners, we're printing this one for a special reason. Because, aside from its general interest, it touches on a subject that's vital to every one of us.

And here's the letter:

. . . . I can just imagine you, as you edit those stories of the Old West, thinking that the frontier days are gone forever; that all a rancher has to do now is to sit in his air-conditioned house—complete with sixteen bathrooms, and a television set—and tell Jeeves to tell someone else to pass the word along to count the latest calf-crop and hurry up and figure the profits. Well, t'ain't so, brother, t'ain't so.

Cattle-ranching, is, and has always been, damn tough, down-to-earth work, sweat, brains and hopes—the latter usually on the market at a 50% discount. Hell, we still have to fight the weather, the ups and downs of the market, and half a dozen other things, all of them annoying, many of them dangerous to stock-raisers. Including rustling.

Your present day rustler has, however, increased his activities to an uncomfortable extent, and the situation's getting worse. True, they no longer round up a batch of cattle and alter the brands, then drive them into another state. And while those we catch don't decorate cottonwoods as they used to, they don't get off easily. I know several of my neighbors who have taken to packing guns again, when they're on the prowl for cattle-thieves.

A couple of weeks ago, we caught one of these rats. He came out without a fight, and submitted to arrest, thinking to bluff it through. But we had the goods on him, and convinced him that the smartest thing for him to do was to make a clean confession.

They're a whole lot smarter than the old-timers were. Most of them operate in bunches of four or five, and they'll roll up to some range in a big moving van, near where a bunch of cattle are bedded down, or grazing.

The back of the van will be let down, the

boys will mount the horses and drive a bunch of fifty head or so into some hidden place. They're all expert butchers and skinners, and after the bunch of cattle is killed—usually by rifles equipped with silencers—the hides and ears will be taken off, the beef cut up, and loaded into the van. By daylight this beef may be a couple of hundred miles away, in a different state, ready to take to a crooked wholesaler or a black-market butcher for public distribution.

The hides, with the brands cut out so that no rancher can identify them may be sunk somewhere many miles from the home range. Sometimes the sight of buzzards floating above the hides may tip off a cowman where to find the evidence of such rustled steers, but the chances are they would have belonged to a rancher living a good distance away.

It occurred to me that you might be interested in this problem which is shared alike by all stock raisers, and perhaps you might call your readers' attention to it. It was bad enough before the war, before beef was rationed, but today with the black market doing their best to kick our war effort in the pants, rustling isn't only plain, ornery thieving—it's as low-down and treasonable a thing as any person can do.

Just one more thing: While most of the beef rustled today is—or has been—shot and slaughtered on the range, there's always the chance that the rustler will resort to other means of killing it. It may be poisoned. It may even have been beef that's quarantined, or beef that's selected by the state livestock commission for experimental purposes, and diseased.

Those are some things to think about if you buy beef which doesn't bear Uncle Sam's stamp of approval. You'll pay a high price for beef or veal that may be plenty dangerous for human consumption. You'll be sabotaging the war effort, and hurting your friends and relatives who are fighting for you, just as much as if you were guilty of holding up production in a war plant. And finally, you'll be aiming a blow at all honest beef ranchers who are doing everything they can to see that our boys—and all of us who are working in this country—get the beef we need. . . .

We think that's a pretty timely letter. And we're sure that all the .44 Western gang will back up Jack and his cowmen friends in their battle against the range-pests who work for the black market.

—THE EDITOR.

BILL, YOU SURE HAVE A SWELL BUILD! DID YOU TRAIN FOR A LONG TIME ?

ABSOLUTELY NOT! THE ATLAS DYNAMIC TENSION SYSTEM MAKES MUSCLES GROW FAST!

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Gunsmoke Swallows



One of the men pitched forward, dropping his six-gun.

CHAPTER ONE

Home—to Hell!

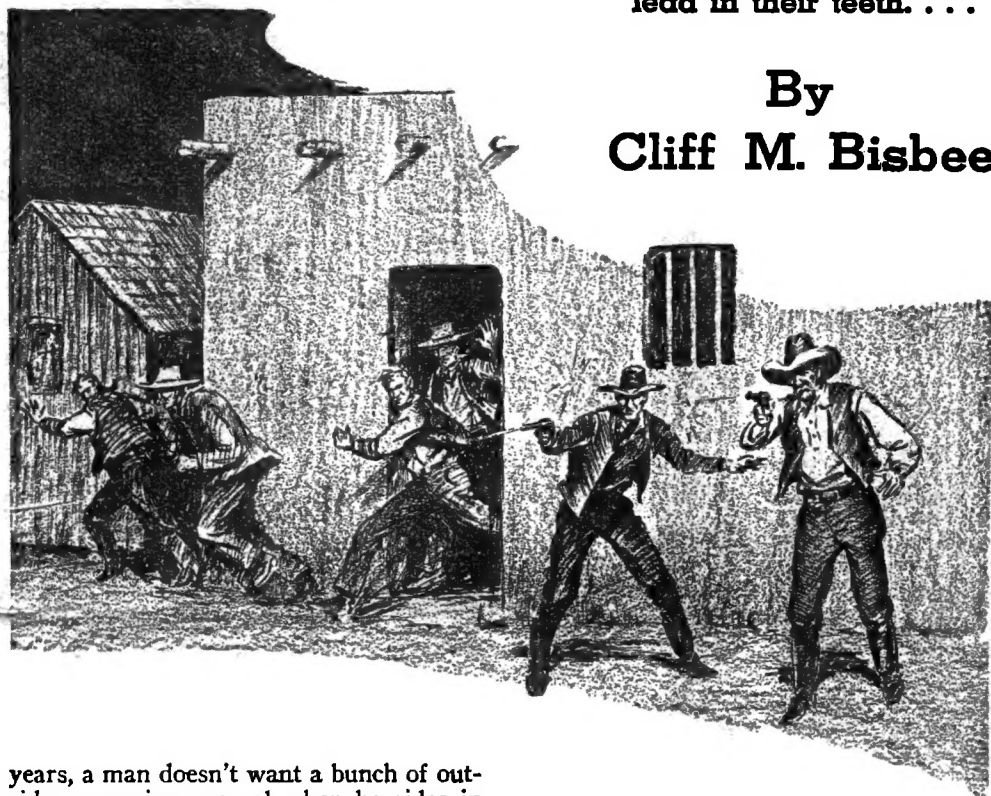
Polk Safford got a foretaste of hell when he returned to find—instead of his peaceful cattle-land home—a lot of nesters' back yards, the brother he'd loved changed to a kill-mad brute. . . . And Polk, himself, charged with the murder of the old rancher for whom he'd gladly have given his life!

DARKNESS was still an hour away when Polk Safford hit the wagon road, a half mile from Wolf Creek Crossing. His blue roan gelding was heavy-footed with weariness. Polk's stomach ached with hunger, though there was food wrapped in the slicker behind his saddle. He figured it had been worth the hard ride, to gain a two-day advance over the slow-moving trail herd he was bringing in from Texas. After more than three

an Empire

A swiftly paced novel of men who were born with lead in their teeth. . . .

By
Cliff M. Bisbee



years, a man doesn't want a bunch of outsiders gawping around when he rides in on home folks.

The stir of excitement within him would not be denied. He urged the tired horse on recklessly, cursing with a sort of joyous impatience in a mixture of standard range lingo and the Argentine jargon he had picked up in those three long years. The dust covered *charro* jacket and vest of *cuero*, decorated with bits of colored ostrich quill—these were Argentine, too. But strictly *Norte Americano* was Polk Safford's six-foot frame.

He had to rein Tracer into the weeds to avoid deep wagon ruts that seamed the the road bed. There had apparently been a great deal of heavy traffic along here, and realization of this brought a puzzled frown to the rider's brow. There was nothing across Wolf Creek, from the edge of the wide mesa clear on across to the jagged Hornet Peaks, except old Race Safford's Stovepipe Ranch.

The frown was swept away in a gasp

of surprise as he approached the river crossing. This ford had always been a tough one, especially with a loaded wagon. But the Stovepipe had struggled over it for two generations in the only way they could—“Belly in an' catfish it!” Morgan Safford used to say. Now the risky crossing was spanned by a heavy steel cable. On the opposite shore, supported from this cable, was a flat-bottomed ferry boat!

Two men sat on the bank, apparently waiting for business. Up the creek bank on that side, was a low-roofed shack built of a conglomeration of material—chunks of tin, assorted boards, cut poles and what-not. This was probably the ferryman's shanty, Polk reflected.

He swung the roan in at the landing, peering across the turbulent stream. Abruptly he drew out his .45 and fired it deliberately into the air. The sharp re-

port brought the two men to their feet with a jerk and they ran onto the boat to disappear into a box-like structure on the deck. Polk Safford watched, a cool grin twitching at his flat mouth, the old hang-care audacity bubbling in his blue eyes. What the hell—if some hombre was fool enough to operate a ferry boat so the Safford clan could ride to town without getting their feet wet, it was a break for Tracer!

The ferry began to move slowly toward him from the opposite shore. Waiting, Polk sifted tobacco into a brown paper, rolled a smoke and stuck it between his lips. He puffed contentedly, letting his gaze sweep the high bluffs across the river. The ranch house was not more than a mile beyond, though the mesa was hidden from here. He wondered what his dad would say, and what good old Morg would say, when he came whooping in on them. He decided he would allow the first excitement to ebb a bit before he let on about the Texas stock he'd bought with his Argentine stake. That herd of fine breeding stock would re-establish the Stovepipe empire that had nearly been wiped out by the disastrous blizzard four years past. Polk had left the ranch with the grim determination to come back heeled for a fresh start—or not return at all. His dad and brother had elected to stay on and tough it out the best they could.

His head went high now, and he felt fine. Home! Give a waddy the drift-fever, he thought soberly, and he might head north to trail his loop along the Musselshell, or he might wander south to drag his rope through the red dust of the *Llano Estacado*, or maybe hit for Mexico or South America. But no matter where he rode, how well or poorly he prospered, no country would ever quite stack up to that waddy's home range. You'd see a puncher squat by the chuck fire with his saddle pards and spin tall yarns about the outfits back home and the men who rode for 'em, but by the dreamy slant of his eyes you'd know he was seeing old places and old friends in brighter garb than he ever saw when he was there.

Homesickness had never bothered Polk Safford—he could take his work and his fun where he found it. But now it came

strongly to him that he had been waiting for this moment since first he turned his back on Wolf Creek. His eyes dropped impatiently to the ferry.

△ △ △

THE boat came in to the landing, groaning and creaking as the men inside the deck house cranked on a man-killing windlass geared to a two-wheel truck that rode the cable overhead. When the blunt end hit the landing with a soft whoosh, the ferrymen came out of a door on the far end of the deck shack. Polk got a brief glimpse of a burly giant who sat down, back to Polk, dangling his feet over the ferry's other end. The other man came forward with a swaggering step and Polk stared.

The ferryman was a slender boy of perhaps sixteen, with a bronzed face and frank, brown eyes that sparkled above an impudent grin.

"Hi, stranger! Come aboard—if you've got a dollar in your jeans," the boy hailed him, the grin widening. "If you haven't got a dollar we'll take four-bits, an' if you're worse off than that we'd settle for a bait of redeye. Barrin' all them, mister, you got a mighty wet swim ahead of you!"

"You win, button," Polk laughed. He rode Tracer aboard and dismounted, handing the kid a five dollar gold piece. He shrugged. "Keep the change."

"My old man's a banker—but I'll take it," the boy said. He dropped the money into a pocket. "I'll ride herd on this for my pard, yonder. Big on beef, Bughouse is, but he got short-changed on brain *sabe*."

The kid headed for the deckhouse, and was about to hail his companion, when Polk reached out a long arm to stop him. Polk was intrigued by this grinning youngster with his tough talk and his honest look.

"So your dad's a banking man, hey, son? That high-collar breed don't seem to fit you."

The kid swung around and met Polk's curious stare with a glint of devilry in his brown eyes. "That's what Pop says, 'most every time he gets me corraled in a corner. Yup. Pop runs the bank up in Stovepipe, the town where you're

headin', I reckon. My sister Julie, she says her beau, Mr. Lucky Hand, really owns it—"

A cold clamminess seemed to lay hold of Polk Safford. His blank eyes reflected his bewilderment. "*Town of Stovepipe?*" he queried sharply. "Are you crazy, kid? Do you know what you're sayin'? There's no town here."

"Say, you sure enough are a stranger! 'Course there's a town up there on the mesa. Don't be callin' Cuff Cameron loco—an, by the way, what's your handle, mister?"

"Polk Safford," the rider said, his eyes still probing the high bluffs that hid the mesa. This impish button must be pulling some kind of hooraw on him! But he had no further time to ponder the startling revelation—or baldfaced lie—because young Cuff Cameron suddenly leaped forward and slapped a slim hand over Polk's mouth, holding it there.

"Great snakes, mister, if that's your real name, don't go springin' it promiscuous around my pardner. There usta be a family of Saffords around here, an' old Bughouse Morg is wild set agin 'em."

Polk had heard enough. He jerked the kid aside roughly and strode around the shack. His head was throbbing at the things the kid had sprung on him and he had some vague intention of collaring the giant partner of the ferry, and getting at the bottom of things. But the surprises he'd had so far were mild compared to the shock that met him as he rounded the deckhouse.

The pardner was standing up now, facing Polk. He was like a great, round-shouldered grizzly, dressed in ragged, filthy buckskins, with long, snarly, black hair, and a tangled beard of the same color. From the red face above the beard peered a pair of the wildest eyes Polk Safford had ever seen.

"Safford, Safford," the giant mumbled dully. "Who mentioned them dirty, thiev-in' skunks?"

Polk stared, awe-struck. His face felt dried and stiff as a chunk of sun-warped cowhide. His lips moved slowly and at last words came from them.

"Morg!" he whispered. "Morg, don't you know me? It's Polk—your own brother!"

CHAPTER TWO

Brother Against Brother

THE big man was Morgan Safford there was no question about that. But not the clear-eyed, hearty laughing brother Polk had left behind. What terrible thing had happened to turn Morg into this mad, unkempt giant who didn't even appear to know that he himself was one of the Saffords he seemed to hate? And what about Dad . . . ?

Gently Polk laid his hand on Morg's ragged sleeve. The big man glared at him truculently, no hint of recognition in those wild orbs. Polk shook his head.

"Look, Morg," he began softly. "You remember Dad—Race Safford. Where—where is he now?"

With a violent gesture the big man flung Polk's hand from his sleeve. He backed away, crouching, his face hideous with hate and rage. Then suddenly, with the fury of a charging lion, he rushed.

His flailing, hammer-like fists lashed out to crash into Polk's body, and between blows Morg screamed, "Don't mention Saffords to me. Them polecats stole—me—blind!"

At the first savage blows Polk stepped backward, unwilling to slug back, still nearly paralyzed at what had happened. But now he saw that Cuff Cameron had already cranked the ferry several yards away from the south shore. He couldn't retreat except by diving overboard, and besides being unwilling to abandon his horse, he had a reckless man's natural disinclination to sidestep any sort of battle. If his mysteriously crazed brother wanted fight, then it was a sizeable dish of the same he would get.

Instinctively, his left arm had crooked up to ward off Morg's crushing fists. Now his right went out to smash into Morg's face, peeling skin from the giant's cheek. Leaping sideways, he flung his body against the deck house in an attempt to get the big man's back toward the railless edge of the boat. But instantly a crafty glint lit up Morg's burning eyes.

Instead of circling, as Polk had expected, Morg charged forward with a loud bellow ripping from his bruised lips. He threw himself bodily against Polk's

trip-hammer fists, raking at the smaller man like an enraged grizzly. A rueful grin twisted Polk's flat mouth. He knew what he was in for! Old Morg might be loco, but he still had the same railroad-camp ideas about fighting. He and this big-built brother had been in more than one brawl in the old days, some of them in fun and some half-serious. Polk figured he still had the edge on Morg for straight boxing, but he remembered with painful vividness those bear-hugs. . . .

He tried desperately to duck away from Morg's great, clutching arms, without success. A second later he was being crushed against his brother's great, heaving chest. His face was jammed smotheringly into the black beard as Morg leaned backward to lift Polk's feet clear of the decks.

As the breath gushed out of him, Polk's popping eyes saw the button, Cuff Cameron, dancing around on top of the deck house, grinning like a demon and shouting encouragingly to both fighters alike.

"Squash the liver out of him, Bughouse!" Cuff yelled now. "Then fling 'im into the river an' we'll see if Texicans can swim. . . ."

At least the little monkey was enjoying the fight, Polk thought grimly. He yanked his heels up high behind him and shoved violently against the side of the deck house. Already off balance, Morg went backward, almost toppling overboard, then veered to sprawl crashingly to the deck. His head hit the boards with a loud thud, and Morg blinked, loosening his grip. Instantly Polk scrambled free, darting to his feet.

"Don't stand there, stranger!" Cuff howled loudly, making swinging motions at an imaginary adversary of his own. "Jump onto 'im. Maybe you can tromp some savvy into his carcass with your boots. He'll do 'er for you if he gets the chance."

"Shut up, you feisty brat!" Polk ordered bleakly. "I thought this big hombre was a friend of yours."

"Aw shucks, he is," Cuff growled, squatting on the deck house roof. "But Bughouse Morg ain't had a fight for weeks. It's good for him. Everybody's scared of him but me an' Lucky Hand. Fact is—"

But Polk abruptly lost interest in what Cuff Cameron was saying. He had been watching warily as Morg sat up slowly, then hunched forward as if he was going to stand up. Instead, the big man suddenly swooped out his arms to clamp Polk's knees in a steel-like grip. He lurched to his knees and crammed his shaggy head straight into Polk's thighs. Polk felt his body zooming backward into thin air.

Though he kicked and clawed wildly in an effort to keep his balance, it was too late. Before he knew just what was happening he was falling straight down, then cold water closed over him. He plunged downward through the murky water, the swift current bruising him against the boat.

Then he was fighting his way up again and a few seconds later he broke the surface. As he gouged water from his eyes and blew the stuff from his mouth, he darted a quick glance upward to see Morg craning over the side, the black beard parted to disclose white teeth in an evil grin. Then the big man leaped into the water!

Silently, grimly, he swam toward Polk Safford, and an instant later the brothers were again locked in deathly combat. Polk tried to lash out with a clubbed fist, but the water cushioned the blow and a splinter on the battered side of the old tub ripped into the flesh of his arm. From the deck, Cuff Cameron gazed down with dumb-struck face at the churning arms and legs.

The current beat the men brutally against the boat and only by holding themselves away with powerful legs could they fight at all. Then abruptly they swept around the bow and the water sucked them downstream rapidly.

One of Morg's huge fists lashed out now, and managed to land solidly on Polk's unprotected nose. He felt his head jerk back, while pain blinded him. He gulped and water choked in his lungs. Then he wrested himself free of those entangling arms, got his head above water. Lunging out now with redoubled fury, he snared his clawed fingers in Morg's beard and jerked hard, forcing the big man's face under water. He held it there for long seconds, while he drove his knees

savagely upward into Morg's flat belly.

Morg threshed wildly, blew out enormous bubbles. But he had to swallow water, a lot of it. And it was then that the floating log hit them. Polk saw it coming, born like a battering ram in the vicious current of the turbulent stream. He jerked his head out of the way, but his loosened grip allowed Morg's head to pop up to the surface. The log hit Morg square in the side of the head and the big man went limp.

Horror roweled Polk. Morg's face went pasty above his drenched beard as he heeled over in the swirling current like some great dead fish. Polk dove frenziedly, came up under the floating body. Hampered by his boots and soaked, heavy clothing, he struck for the nearest shore with Morg in tow. He swam desperately, alternately praying and cursing, aware of little now save the punishing surge of the water, which sapped his ebbing strength swiftly.

Pain jarred against his threshing legs and he knew he had been smashed against a submerged boulder. But when he thrust his legs downward his heels hit solid footing. Grimly he inched his way to the weed-grown, muddy shore. A few seconds later he had Morg's inert body dragged clear of the lapping water. He didn't lose time, but rolled Morg face down. The bearded man coughed, lurched, and began retching gallons of muddy water. He gasped air into his lungs.

Polk laughed crazily as he began pounding and massaging Morg's legs and arms to get circulation going. "You damned poor crazy galoot," he spoke jerkily through stiff lips. "Whatever kind of hell-spawned upheaval has been going on around here, at least you're alive, *hermano*. Thank God for that!"

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THE fight was gone out of Morg Safford when he finally came around. He sat up groggily, feeling the raw wound on his head where the floating log had struck. He stared at Polk with a baffled expression, then a swift grin parted his tangled beard.

"You fight good," he rumbled thickly. He looked around wearily at the brushy

bank then leaned forward to whisper. "You wanta help me on my secret?"

"Secret?" Polk queried wonderingly. Then he asked softly. "What is it, pard?"

"Murder!"

Morg whispered the one word hoarsely, then leaned back and laughed in a way that made Polk's flesh creep. He scooped a gob of mud off the side of his face and squashed it in his thick fingers. "I'll splatter 'em flat, just like that hunk of mud—or you and me will. But there's a lot of 'em, and it might take us a long time. Are yuh game?"

"Sure, sure. Anything you say," Polk managed. "But who we going to kill?"

Bughouse Morg laughed again, louder and more weirdly. "The Saffords. The whole fam-damly of 'em. But they're smart, compadre. Fact is, I been looking for forty-nine years and I ain't found none of them rattlesnakes yet. I tell you—you hunt 'em out, and I'll do the kill-in'."

"That sounds okay," Polk agreed. He asked cautiously. "What'd these Saffords do to you, Morg?"

Morg stared at him blankly. "I forget, but I was rich once, and I guess them dirty sons stole everything I had. Lucky Hand could tell you, if he would. Lucky, he knows most everything. That's why I work for him, and do them night jobs for him, 'cause some day I figure he'll lead me to where the Saffords are hidin' out and then I can cut 'em up and feed 'em to my pet catfish in the crik there."

Cuff Cameron had laboriously cranked the ferry back over to this side, up by the shack. Now the button jumped ashore and started down along the bank. Just then a party of riders came down from the mesa road. Cuff stopped to speak to them, pointing down this way, after which they followed him down the riverbank path. Polk's spearing glance singled out each rider separately for a quick appraisal. His face went bleak and hard as he tried one more low-toned question on Bughouse Morg.

"What kind of jobs do you do for Lucky Hand, amigo?"

Morg stood up now beside Polk. He put his hand to his head again and looked down stupidly at his soaked clothing. "I—I dunno," he mumbled. "My head

hurts. I don't feel so good, compadre. . . ."

"Tell me one thing, pronto," Polk whispered. "Just name off these folks that're coming down here with the kid. Do that for me and you can always count on me for a friend, Morg."

Morg nodded and looked at the approaching party. "That oldish gent with the white chin whiskers and the pink baby's face is Colonel Brett Cameron. It was his money built the town of Stovepipe, they say. The gal is Julie. She treats me fine, Julie does, only sometimes she puts water in the whiskey Lucky brings me. That tall gent with the white Stetson is Lucky Hand himself. Just about the biggest punkin around this range, Lucky is. . . ."

"How about that dark little hombre on the grulla mare. Who's he?"

A growl stirred Morg's throat. "That's Knife Gabon, the sheriff," the crazed giant muttered. His eyes flashed dully. "I don't trust that rannihan. Sometimes I suspect he might be a Safford. I damn' near killed him once, but Lucky and Cuff stopped me. Someday I'll get another chance. When I do—" he broke off to draw one stubby finger across his hairy throat, at the same time emitting a blood-chilling gurgle. Polk made a mental note to watch the runty, scowling sheriff. Unaccountably, Gabon had jerked a carbine from his saddle boot.

CHAPTER THREE

Vanished Range

AS THEY strode forward to meet the party, Polk found his gaze dwelling on the girl, Julie Cameron. She was a born rider, he decided at once. The ease with which she sat her trim, long-legged bay showed that. A flat-brimmed hat was dangling carelessly down her back, secured by a leather thong. The dark felt made a nice background for her wavy auburn hair, for the hazel eyes that were set in a fine-boned face. There was a hint of golden freckles across her nose. Her cheeks flushed slightly at his direct stare, which may have been a habit he had picked up in the Argentine.

It was Lucky Hand who spoke first, and his words jolted through Polk Safford like the kick of a mule.

"All right, Gabon. Make the arrest!"

Polk pivoted quickly. The dark little sheriff had the rifle pointed at his chest. But Knife Gabon hesitated, flicking an uneasy glance toward Bughouse Morg. He licked his thin lips, then grunted, "Put up your hands, mister. I'm arresting you—for murder!"

Polk's jaw went slack in utter stupefaction. What in God's name had he ridden into here! Before he could make answer in the fuming words of denial that welled to his tongue, Morgan Safford's burly figure hurtled across the narrow space. The giant gave voice to an enraged howl as he dove for the sheriff. Gabon swung the rifle, his dark face blanching, his eyes dangerous with fear and hate.

"Morg!"

The single explosive word came sharply from Lucky Hand. The tall man's bland, smooth features had gone hard as flint. At his commanding tone the giant ferryman dug his heels into the ground, and swung obediently, head lowered and eyes sullen.

Lucky Hand coolly shoved Gabon's rifle barrel to one side. Polk's own involuntary move forward was checked and his hand went to his thigh. But his .45 was gone, probably to the bottom of Wolf Creek, he thought bleakly.

"That big ape is dangerous, Lucky!" the sheriff snarled reedily. "I'd ought to of plugged him."

"Shut up," Hand ordered. He spoke quietly to Morg, yet his tone was like a whiplash to the crazed man, who cringed at the sound of it. "You go up to the shack with Cuff, and get those wet buckskins off before they dry on you for good. Take care of him, Cuff."

Cuff Cameron had been staring at Polk Safford, and for once his impish face wore a look of contrition. "Murder!" he whispered, staring. His voice rose tremblingly, close to tears. "Godfries, I wisht I hadn't never told who you was!"

The girl spoke now, for the first time. "You did right, Cuff. You mustn't make friends with—" she paused, her hazel eyes sliding to Polk's tense, rock-hard face. "With strangers," she finished lamely.

Cuff went reluctantly toward the ferryman's shack, Morg following slowly, a dazed look on his homely features. Polk

had time to wonder by what sort of devil's token this handsome, prominent looking hombre called Lucky Hand, could make his crazed brother crawl like a whipped dog. He spoke up now, blazingly.

"I suppose you realize I might have made a break for it, while all this was going on just now," he said bitingly, directing his words to the group as a whole, rather than to Gabon alone. "I just thought I'd stick around and ask a simple question. Just who in hell do you think you're arresting? I've never seen any of you before in my life!"

"I've got a warrant for a gent called Polk Safford." Knife Gabon made the name sound like a cuss word. He was managing to look pretty threatening now that he didn't have to worry about Morg. "Are you him?"

"Why should I deny it?" Polk asked hotly. "Morgan Safford there is my brother, and three years ago, last time I saw him, a saner man never lived—"

Julie and her quiet father looked startled, but Hand merely laughed silkily. It was Knife Gabon who answered. "Just

call that loco coot a Safford, and see where it gets you! Bughouse Morg don't even know his own name, nor neither does nobody else. But it ain't Safford. There was only two Saffords in Stovepipe when the range was first opened up to homesteaders. Old Race, and a no-good son named Polk. . . ." Gabon's low brow was beetled as he talked, and his voice had taken on a sort of sing-song, as though he strove to remember a rehearsed speech.

"That's right," Colonel Brett Cameron spoke now, nodding soberly. "There is plenty of proof of that."

It was all coming so thick and fast for Polk, that he felt bewildered. Cuff had mentioned the "town" of Stovepipe, when all there had been for seventy-five years was a rock-and-'dobe ranch-house squatting on the mesa in a motte of tamerack and pine. And now they were spouting about homesteaders. Homesteaders on the ranch of that proud old beef king, Race Safford! It just didn't make sense. But then, neither did any of the rest of it. Swift premonition rolled over him now, like a smothering wave.

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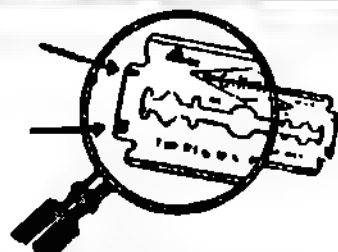
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"What," he inquired dully, "became of my father?"

"You should ask, hombre," the sheriff grunted cryptically. "You damned skunk!"

At the muzzle of the sheriff's carbine Polk was driven up the riverbank. They put him on his own horse and lashed his hands securely to the horn. When he began a hot protest Knife Gabon cut him full across the face with a rope end. Pain blinded him and warm blood trickled down his left cheek. He heard Julie's sharp gasp.

"Never mind trying to act shocked, Miss Cameron," Polk muttered bitterly, without looking around at her. "I can take anything your dirty friends can dish out."

In quick anger she spurred past him and sent her sleek bay into the mesa road ahead of the party. Even as she did so she wondered why his remark bothered her and why she felt irked when Lucky Hand rode up to side her. Polk Safford's mocking laugh drifted to her, hard and brittle. The man was dangerous, an outlawed killer, Lucky said. Strange, she thought, that he should claim to be a brother of that poor, twisted ferryman.

Cameron also went up to join his daughter and Lucky Hand, while Gabon herded Tracer along behind him. Polk rode broodingly, still dazed by all this, eager yet strangely reluctant to reach the mesa and see what sort of transformation had taken place on the Stovepipe range. From scraps of conversation of the party ahead, he gathered that it was no coincidence that they had happened by the ferry crossing. Apparently they had ridden out on some business with a homesteader named McGann. Whatever business it was, it seemed to distress the banker, Cameron. Or was he simply a more clever actor than Hand, whose cool satisfaction was apparent? They couldn't go on supporting these shiftless fools forever, Hand informed the banker coldly. Polk listened intently, but made no sense of anything else that was said.

They hit the high banks of rimrock where the road twisted snakelike through jagged pillars of stone. And a minute later they came out on top. It was worse

than anything Polk's wild imaginings had conjured. He counted seven homestead shanties within sight of the road in the first mile. There were patches of corn and potatoes, some young orchards. There was still considerable grassland but not many cattle and those few, poor stuff. And every place you looked there were barbed wire fences festooning the countryside.

A gusty, ragged sigh escaped Polk's lips and he hung his head on his chest. He kept it that way until he felt houses and people around him and then he looked up and saw the town. It was narrow and flat and ugly, but it looked damned permanent!

Suspended over the main street was a canvas banner with red letters that said: "Stovpeipe, Wyoming. Settlers made welcome—see Lucky Hand for open claims or relinquishments."

Here and there along the busy, crowded street were signboards that told a lot. One said: "Hand and Wickersham, Gen'l Mdse." On a corner was the bank, with the names of Colonel Cameron and Lucky Hand in gold on the plate glass window. Across from the bank was a neat office building with the legend: "Hand Development Corporation" sprawled across the front.

Under a circle of pines, the only standing trees in the town, was a squat, rambling building that looked like a fortress. Somebody inside was pounding out a mournful dirge on a tinny piano. The place was known, Polk saw by the sign, as Lucky's Casino. He had to glance at it twice before he realized it was the house where he and Morgan Safford had been born. He was too stupefied now to feel any real surprise.

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THE girl, Julie, sent him one more swift, compassionate glance as Knife Gabon jerked Tracer toward a back alley. But Polk's face was like a carving in hard stone and his blue eyes were grim. Then Hand spoke to her and she rode on down the street with him and her father.

Gabon curtly ordered him to dismount when they reached the rear courtyard of a thick-walled stone jailhouse that ran through to the street. Polk surmised that

the sheriff's office was up front. He was forced up a short flight of steps into a hallway, and for one wild instant he considered flinging himself on Gabon's spidery figure, even with tied hands. But the sick feeling within him was too sweeping, too harsh and bitter. After all, what difference did it make what happened to him now?

They went through a large room where a dozen men were playing cards and telling dirty stories. A lot of deputies for one small town, he thought, with a surge of wonder. The hard-looking bunch glanced at him curiously and Knife Gabon grinned, squaring his narrow shoulders cockily.

"You'd never guess," he crowed. "Polk Safford! Lucky for us, that unspanked brat of Cameron's tipped us to the hombre. I had to kick him around some to tone him down, but here he is."

The deputies whistled, their eyes popping.

"Lucky for us—an' lucky for Lucky," one of them commented dryly. Polk heard them all laugh as Gabon prodded him on to another hallway that was lined with steel-barred cells. Voices up toward the front hushed abruptly as they came in. So there were other prisoners! But hope of finding out anything from them died within him when the sheriff shoved him into a small cell with two bunks, way to the rear of the corridor.

Knife Gabon gave him a shove that sent him reeling into the cell to crash against a double-decked steel bunk. "Get in there, damn' you!" the dark little man spat. He shut the door with a final click, then stood rubbing his hands together, his crooked teeth showing in a grin. He shook his head. "It's the blamedest thing I ever saw—you stepping right into our hands. . . !"

Chuckling, he went away, leaving Polk Safford in the silent gloom. The rider removed his damp clothes and draped them on the upper bunk. Wrapping a smelly blanket around his body, he sagged down wearily on the lower bunk. Maybe this was what a timber wolf feels like when he returns to familiar, trusted haunts and suddenly finds a steel trap springing out of nowhere to grip him with hard, relentless fingers. It was unreal and incredible, the whole crazy picture, and yet

it was there. The Stovepipe ranch and the open range around it was gone, and no power on earth could redeem it.

But what had happened to Race Safford, what mysterious cruelty had so warped Morg's fine, clear mind that he spent his days cursing his own name? Polk had heard of landboomers like Lucky Hand, who took advantage of the homestead laws and of honest settlers who were seeking to wrest homes from the vast acres of the cattle country. But nearly five thousand acres of the Stovepipe had been patented land, including a section each that Race and his sons had taken up under the Grazing Act, and the balance bought from cowboys who had patented it for the Saffords. Not strictly legal, maybe, but it was done everywhere by cowmen to protect their own hard-won domains.

Now a ruthless syndicate had thrown up a mushroom town on Safford land, wiping out almost overnight a cattle kingdom that had seen three generations of Indian wars, sheep wars, drouths and blizzards, and had weathered them all. No wonder the moving, driving spirit behind that mysterious wipe-out called himself "Lucky"! Polk flopped over in the bunk and stared at the new stone walls. Savage, brooding hatred flooded him.

Tomorrow night his trail-herd, the fine beeves that were to have restocked his father's empire, would be at the river crossing. There his Texas crew would wait for his orders. A vain wait. There was little question in the waddy's mind that by that time he would be four feet under ground.

Again voices rumbled from other cells up front, but Polk could distinguish no words. The noisy bunch of deputies had left, and the gloomy corridors had deepened to pitch blackness when Gabon again came in, herding ahead of him a lurching, drunken figure. He unlocked the door of Polk's cell and shoved the drunk in. The man mumbled stupidly and sat down on the floor. Whiskey fumes filled the cell.

"I don't want any souse getting sick in my cell," Polk argued hotly. "Put this hombre someplace else."

Gabon locked the barred door again. His teeth had a yellow glitter in the light of the lantern he had brought. He

shrugged heavily. "When Stovepipe elects you sheriff, mister, you can run this pest hole to suit yourself. Now, you take what you git."

"Were you elected sheriff?" Polk queried. "Or did Lucky Hand just hire you. . ."

"None of your damned business," Gabon sneered. He wheeled away, taking his lantern with him. Polk stared toward the dim figure of the drunk. He had a queer feeling the man was staring at him, but abruptly the fellow staggered erect and slumped onto the lower bunk. It was too dark to see what he looked like.

Shrugging, he climbed to the upper bunk and stretched out on the thin, hard pad. The dirty smell of the half-mouldy bedding, added to the reeking fumes from the man below, nearly overcame him. But after awhile he managed to sleep.

It may have been the creaking of the steel framework of the bunks that awakened him, or the white patch of moonlight that filtered into the cell. Without stirring he opened his eyes, turning them toward the edge of the bunk. The bulk of a head and a pair of massive shoulders loomed close beside him. And even in that first second he caught the glint of faint light on steel in the man's hand.

The dark arm swooped up in a driving arc, the naked blade of the long knife plunging toward Polk's chest. He rolled violently, grabbing the arm and twisting it away. The strong fumes told him his assailant was the supposed drunk. With a smothered oath the fellow leaped backward and the two of them hurtled against the opposite wall. Locked together, they fought furiously for possession of the deadly knife. This was no drunk he was fighting!

A knee smashed upward against his stomach, barely missing the groin. Pain knotted within him and the arm holding the knife forced downward a few inches. A beefy face was jammed into his own and abruptly Polk sunk his teeth into flesh. He bit hard, tasted the tang of blood in his mouth as a hoarse bellow ripped from the fellow's lips. They zoomed around in a circle, smashing with breath-taking force against the bunks. A second later they were rolling on the floor.

The blade stabbed down suddenly,

piercing deep into Polk's shoulder. The searing, hot pain brought an involuntary sobbing gasp from him, before he clamped his lips tight together. With desperate strength he forced the arm away, and swung up a clubbed left fist to batter the other's face. The knife clattered to the floor and Polk grabbed it and flung himself clear. Hot blood trickled down his back.

The other scrambled up instantly, flattened himself against the outer wall, blowing and panting. His head was a bobbing shadow against the barred square of the window. Polk jerked the knife back and flung it in a lightning overhand style he had learned in *gaucho* brawls in the Argentine.

But the big head ducked downward and the knife went sailing through the window. "That makes us even, anyhow," Polk grunted. "The undertaker will never recognize your mangy carcass when I get through with you. *Al muerte!*"

He dove forward. But the man had other ideas. His knife gone, his spirit for battle went with it. He sidestepped with cat-like alertness. A key grated with a dry, rusty rattle, and before Polk could haul himself up short of the stone wall and whirl around, the door clanged shut in his face.

"Come back and fight!" he raged. "By Satan, hombre, I'll live to clamp my hands around your cowardly neck yet. . ."

But the would-be murderer was gone into the whispering dark silence of the jail. So they wanted him dead, Polk thought grimly—but they had no authority to hang him! If the stabbing had worked on schedule, he could see how easy it would have been to make it look like suicide, a confession of guilt for which they had no proof. Again he wondered who it was he had been supposed to kill.

CHAPTER FOUR

Murder Frame-up

GABON came in early next morning, with two deputies. The sheriff looked surly and sour as he unlocked the cell door. After what happened last night, he's afraid of me, Polk thought.

His own temper was edgy. He hadn't slept any more after the attack, but had sat warily on the edge of the bunk all night. He peered at the two uglies who accompanied the sheriff now, but neither of them bore marks of recent battle.

"Come out of that, hombre," Gabon ordered shortly. "Down the hall with you—"

"I missed my cell pard this morning," Polk said acidly. "Must've squeezed out through the bars."

"Shut up!" Gabon growled.

They marched him down the hall to the bull-pen and shoved him in with a half-dozen others. Polk was surprised. "Don't tell me you've changed your minds about drygulching me? Or is it just that I'll be less conspicuous in here in case of jail visitors? If I turn up missing some morning, nobody'd be any wiser, eh? Better than bungling another suicide and having it backfire on you some way. . ."

Gabon snarled and smashed him across the side of the head with a gun butt. He staggered into the bull-pen and sprawled to the floor under the curious stares of the other prisoners. The sheriff and his escort clumped away. Polk sat up and looked around, holding his head. He had bandaged his shoulder with a strip torn from his shirt tail. The whole left arm was stiff and painfully sore.

The six other prisoners were eating breakfast at a table anchored to the floor and made of a steel boiler plate. They silently made room for him, each of them giving him a portion of their own meager breakfast, which they put on the bread plate. All were dull and hopeless looking. Five of them were obviously farmers. None looked like drunks or law-breakers of the usual sort.

The sixth man was short and stocky, an oldster with gray beard and shaggy eyebrows big enough to stuff a pillow with. From under the hairy brows a pair of fierce eyes stared hard at Polk. He had a tattered black hat which was pulled down low over his face, but now he shoved it abruptly to the back of his shining bald head. His beard parted to show three yellowed teeth in a broad grin.

The oldster's hand was suddenly thrust across the table and the staring Polk found his own hand grasping the gnarled palm

in a strong grip, his eyes lighting up.

"Blackrock Charlie Mills!" he blurted. This shaggy old man had trapped wolves and other varmints on the Stovepipe range for years. "By Harry, I'd give up hope of running across anybody that could tell me what the hell has happened here in three short years."

"Plenty, Polk," Mills told him solemnly. His first grin had given way to a worried seriousness. "Son, I been prayin' I'd never see you ride back to this range. These polecats—and that includes Lucky Hand as the biggest of 'em—have only had one thing to worry them. And that was you! But you walked right into their hands. It's a damn' shame."

The oldster shook his head sadly. "Maybe you know what I'm really in here for then," Polk began. Mills nodded somberly. "This will shock you, if you ain't heard it already. Your dad was murdered right after him and Hand become pardners, about a year after you left. Race and Morg hadn't heerd nothing from you, and when Hand come along with his offer to buy a half interest and restock the range, they took him up. It wasn't until after Lucky had the land surveyed and brought in his first bunch of settlers that the story started that it was you that murdered your own dad—"

Polk sagged back onto the wooden bench, his face white. He had expected most anything, but not this! The fact that he was accused of Race's killing made the shock doubly acute. His jaws came slowly together, tensing like a steel trap. "Thanks for telling me, Blackrock. How—how about Morg. I've seen him. What in God's name happened to him?"

"So help me, son, I don't know. Him and your dad was just hangin' on here by the skin of their teeth when I headed up into the Wind River country. When I come back I got the same kind of shock as you did, or purty near so. Things had already changed and Morg was—well, jest like he is now. I heerd the stories that was goin' around, and when I rared up on my hind legs and started spoutin' off to refute them lies, I wound up in this *jusgado*. Hand and Gabon and their bought judge, old Cameron, they just keep a bunch of fake warrants handy to use on anybody that gets out of line or crosses

Lucky's set-up. Don't make much difference what you're accused of. If you don't die in here, which more'n one hombre has, they 'extradite' you to some other state. Only I got a good hunch most of 'em wind up in Wolf Creek or feedin' the buzzards over the Hornets. Some few has been hung outright."

Polk's eyes narrowed. He spoke musingly, "So Colonel Cameron is just one of Hand's hirelings, eh?" His thoughts went bleakly to Cuff and Julie. The button he could not find blame for—he was a smart youngster, but too young to savvy all this. As he grew older he'd probably settle into the same crooked groove. But the girl, Julie. . . . His first impression of her had been wrong. She would have some idea what kind of a skunk she was marrying, and the type of underhand dealings her dad was engaged in. What the hell! Why was he even thinking about her? With an effort he jerked his attention to what one of the prisoners was saying. The speaker was a tall, stooped man of middle age. His strong, homely features gave the impression of a man who would not be stepped on. Which was no doubt why he was here—

"Most us settlers are beginning to get different ideas about Cameron," this fellow growled. "He's quiet and easy-going—but hard as flint when it comes to business deals. Maybe he just makes a front for Lucky, but we figure it was his money that backed this whole landboom, and built the town of Stovepipe. We got no use for Lucky Hand, but it's Cameron we're gonna strike at if we ever get the chance."

"What I don't get," a dull-looking hombre mumbled helplessly, "is where's the payoff angle? Hand and Cameron really did open this territory up and get a lot of us started on our claims or boughten acres."

Blackrock Charlie broke in now to make Polk acquainted with their fellow prisoners. The homely farmer was named Ben Stone, the slow-witted man was Abijah Adams. There were four others: Jim Bel-lows, Ackerman, Wheatley, and a raw-boned old-timer named Kansas Coombs. Coombs thrust a rocky paw into Polk's hand and shook it warmly. "Glad to know you, Safford. I always heerd old Race got

murdered mysterious like, an' I figgered maybe some day his kin would drift in and maybe get to the bottom of lots of shady deals these crooks are pullin' around here. Never knowed poor old Bughouse Morg was a Safford, though."

It was this fellow, Coombs, who shrewdly explained to Adams where the syndicate made their money. "My gosh, they're raking it in ever' place they turn," he rumbled. "Every settler comes in here has to sign a contract to buy all his equipment and supplies from Hand-owned enterprises, and they got to sell all their produce through the same men. On top of this, all the paper and money has to be handled through Cameron's bank, and Cameron is the judge in all disputes. When a family is busted and washed up there ain't nothin' they can do but move out and make way for other suckers, which syndicate agents back East have sold on Stovepipe claims. The few that's got gumption enough left to put up a fight—well, us fellers in here is good examples. We're railroaded to jail, and there ain't no way in God's world to get word outside, and likely wouldn't do no good if we did."

"Court arguments won't get you no place, nor Polk either." Mills snorted. "We're too far from real law that ain't Hand-made."

"Mills is right," Polk put in. "Band together and drive the crooks out with the only arguments they understand—gunsmoke law of our own! Then see what can be done with the mess that's left. . . ."

"Only one drawback to that," Stone asserted dryly. His bleak glance around at the rocky walls and steel bars that made their prison, needed no further comment.

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LATER the same two guards came for the dishes and again Polk was gruffly ordered into the corridor. He was shoved along to the big room at the rear. Inside was the same group that had brought him in yesterday from the river crossing—Gabon, Hand, Cameron and his daughter. The girl's hazel eyes flashed instantly to Polk's and he was startled by the expression in them. What was she trying to tell him? But instantly

she dropped her glance away and he thought he must have been fooling himself. What interest could this girl possibly have in him?

Lucky Hand spoke smoothly now, apparently continuing an argument begun before Polk's arrival. "This grilling may not be pleasant, Julie. Why don't you go out and do some shopping?"

"Lucky's right, honey," Cameron put in. The Colonel looked harrassed and worried. The wrinkled pouches under his eyes were dark. "After all, there's no need of your—"

"I said I'd stay, and I'm staying," the girl declared positively.

Hand shrugged. He fingered his neat black mustache. He nodded to Cameron. "All right, Colonel. As the judge of Stovepipe's court, I guess you're in authority to question this fellow."

The banker cleared his throat and swung his gaze to Polk, who had been roughly shoved into a chair by his two guards. "First, what we *know* about you, Safford. Three years ago you left your father to face poverty and ruin alone—"

"That's a lie on two counts!" Polk cried. He knew the futility of making any defense against this frame they were clinching around him. Yet, somehow he wanted the girl to believe in him. He directed his words to her. "I was after money enough to put the Stovepipe back on its feet. Besides, my brother—"

"That's enough!" Lucky Hand roared, thrusting out a black-clad arm. The landboomer's voice dropped to a purr. "Don't make a fool of yourself with repeating that crazy yarn about old Bughouse Morg being your brother. As a matter of fact,

Morg came West with me, when I first came out to make a deal with Race Safford."

The girl now spoke up quickly. "Yes. We have your word for that, haven't we, Lucky?" Hand's eyes kindled in anger, but he veiled it quickly. Colonel Cameron looked startled at his daughter's insinuating tone. He swung a questioning glance to Hand. Julie sank back in her chair and bit her lip.

"What else do you know about me, Cameron?" Polk said bitterly, loading his voice with contempt. Cameron went on grimly, but he had lost some of his assurance.

"Two years ago, you came back, on the same day Lucky Hand paid your father a sum of money for a share in the ranch. You got drunk, argued with Safford. Hand and Gabon witnessed that. Later they found Safford murdered, and you were gone—with the money." The banker halted, his face red at his own bald account. Again he shot a questioning glance to Hand. The landboomer nodded, while Polk choked in silence.

"That's enough." He drew a paper from the desk and spread it out. "We have a confession ready, outlining those facts, and stating that you killed Safford in drunken anger, and stole the money. You'll make things easier for yourself by signing the confession without argument."

Polk's throat tightened. The cold-blooded plot against him was inhuman and looking into the landboomer's pale, glittering eyes, bitter hate surged deep within him. Either Hand or Gabon or both of them had murdered Race Safford and were responsible for whatever mys-



terious horror had twisted Morgan Safford's mind. Furthermore, that Hand had some hidden hold over the banker, was plain. Polk sensed that now, and he knew that the girl felt it too, and that was why she had shut up. She was staring at her father now with something close to fright in her clear eyes. Polk took a deep breath and again faced Lucky Hand.

"The whole thing is a lie. I'd be a fool to sign it. And you can do your damndest!"

Hand jerked his head toward the two guards. "Truss him up! We have ways of wringing the truth from fools."

The two burly guards hauled him across the room to an upright post against the wall. They ripped off his shirt and secured his hands to an iron ring a foot above his head. Icy beads of sweat broke out on his forehead as he realized what was coming.

One of the guards took a shot-loaded buggy whip from a closet. He came across the room with it, swishing it in the air with wolfish relish. Polk cursed softly, waiting.

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BEHIND him the girl's breath sucked in sharply. "I—I've always wondered what those rings were for!" Her eyes turned accusingly toward Cameron.

"I never knew how they've been getting those confessions," the banker blurted. "That's the truth, Julie!"

"Shut up," Hand growled. "All right, men, give him a taste of it—or maybe he'd rather scribble his name for us. . . ."

"Go to hell," Polk grunted.

A second later the first blow came. The searing shock of it was terrific, worse than he had expected. It was like a knifing bolt of lightning that bit deep into his frame, wrenching a forced groan from his lips. Then he jammed his jaws shut and drew every fiber taught as a gut fiddle string. He'd give them as little satisfaction as possible. . . .

The leather whined through the air again and smashed across the bare flesh. The long thongs at the tip licked around his body like the deadly coils of a snake,

or burning tongues of flame. He was aware, dimly, of the girl's involuntary sobs, of Colonel Cameron's angry cries. But Lucky Hand's liquid voice cut through the other sounds, through the welling, incredible pain, urging the torturer on. Then abruptly, when his body began to sag, the whip dropped and he jerked erect, gasping heavily.

Paper rustled sharply in the silence as Hand picked up the confession. Then he laid it down again with an oath of annoyance as the outer door burst open and a deputy barged in. Polk stared through the sweat that burned his eyes. The man had a fresh bandage across his nose! So that's the hombre that tried to knife me, Polk thought. I'll remember him. . . .

The fellow gestured to Lucky, who followed him into the outer hallway, closing the door behind him. With his head turned against that wall, Polk could hear their low voiced conversation clearly.

"Say, boss," the gunman rasped hoarsely. "I done my best on that jigger in there last night. But he pulled a hide-out gun—"

"Never mind lying!" Hand snapped impatiently. "That was Gabon's fool idea anyway. Now what the hell do you want?"

"It's that damn' McGann, that sod-buster. He's been talking around that the bank is puttin' the squeeze on him, and the rest of 'em are gettin' riled. Things are coming to a head, boss!"

"Bah!" Hand snorted disdainfully. "We'll make them back water soon enough. You take a couple of the boys, and get Bughouse Morg, and give McGann's place the works. Dope old Bughouse up on red-eye—tell him it's a present from me, tell 'im McGann's one of the Saffords! Then turn him loose out there with five gallons of kerosense and a couple of guns. . . ."

The landboomer strode back into the room and slammed the door loudly. He snatched the paper and thrust it into Polk's face. "How about it, hombre?" he sneered. "Changed your mind?"

Polk shook his head. "Not a bit!"

Lucky shrugged and stepped back, motioning to the burly guard who still held the whip dangling. But Julie Cameron flew across the room now, planted her small body in front of Polk. She faced

Hand, her eyes blazing. "What good would a confession be, tortured from a man like that?" she raged.

"Thanks, Miss Julie," Polk muttered. "But never mind. You'll only—"

Eyes narrowing, Lucky Hand grabbed the girl's shoulder and sent her reeling back to her chair. Cameron leaped up, but subsided with a groan as the second guard promptly jammed a gun barrel into his side.

White-faced, the girl crouched in her chair. "I—I'll never marry you, *Mister* Hand—not in a thousand years! God, I've been blind, insane to think—"

"Perhaps your father will see that I am not 'jilted'," Hand oozed. His hand raised abruptly and again the whip-lash whistled out and the torture commenced again. How long it went on this time, or how much of this terrific punishment the human body could withstand, Polk did not know. He was only aware that the sounds and the objects in the room blended in one crazy whirling kaleidoscope, shot through with wracking pain.

Thunder roared in his ears and everything blurred into a red haze, until finally came a wrenching, plunging sensation, and he slid into oblivion. His choked, hissing breath, and the girl's muffled sobs as her father held her close, were the only sounds in the room.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Jailbreak Starts a War

POLK SAFFORD peered through blurred lids at the anxious faces of Blackrock Charlie Mills and the other men. He knew dully that he was back in the bull pen, face down on the table. Blackrock's shaggy brows shuttled up and down.

"You still alive, Polk? What a beating them sidewinders give you!"

"I'm—okay, I guess," Polk got out. Pain sheeted across his back as he tried to move, and something dug at his shoulder. "Leave go of my shoulder, com-padre," he grunted.

"I ain't got your shoulder, son," Blackrock informed him gently. "Mebby that bandage is too tight, where you got stabbed last night. Somebody put fresh

dressings on that and on that chunk of hamburger you call your back."

"The girl must have done that for him," came the heavy voice of Kansas Coombs. "I'm guessing her and that button, Cuff, are square as they come. They just don't savvy the kind of cougars they're in with."

"I know they're okay," Polk swore gruffly, swinging his feet and sitting up stiffly. He grimaced and felt gingerly at his raw wounds. "And the old Colonel has maybe got in up to his neck before he realized what it was all about, too. In fact—Thunderation, Blackrock. Rip off that damn shoulder bandage and see if there ain't a fox-tail or something in there. . . ."

Blackrock Charlie peeled down the shirt and unfastened the bandage. He lifted off gauze layers and laid them on the table. "Yup. A little sticker in there, sure enough. Now how in—"

"Hold it!" Polk's hand darted to the pile of gauze pads, picked a small piece of paper from among them. His voice dropped to a whisper and he glanced quickly toward the corridor to make sure no guard was near. "Look! It's a note. Wait a minute, let me read it. . . ."

No one in building during supper hour but two guards. The one that brings in your food from China Joe's will be drunk. The hardware dealer next door keeps plenty of guns and ammunition on his shelves. Wish I could do more, but that's the best.

Julie C.

"She took a long chance, writin' that," Ben Stone grunted.

"Yeah, and puttin' the sticker in there so's Polk'd feel it diggin' in, wasn't so dumb," Blackrock asserted stoutly. "By God, son, if I was younger, and a gal like that. . . ."

"Shut up, you old rooster," Polk grumbled. But his heart was going through strange contortions. It was worth a lot to know Julie Cameron would run such a risk for him. His thoughts churned to an abrupt stop. Of course she was thinking of them all in here. He'd be a fool to kid himself. . . . With an effort he jerked himself back to grim realities.

"If we can get out of here, we'll raise some fancy brands of hell," Blackrock

Charlie swore venomously, eyes gleaming.

"We're not out yet," Polk pointed out sagely. "But if the girl does manage to get that guard drunk we might stand a chance."

"Listen! I've busted outa worse pest holes than this, many's the time," old Kansas Coombs put in. "Look, now. When this feller comes along with the supper. . ."

It was about dusk when the corridor door at the far end swung jerkily open and a lurching figure appeared, bearing a tray piled with food. Behind him came a second stumbling figure.

"Both of 'em comin'!" Ben Stone whispered.

"And both drunk," Wheatley muttered. "Doggone it, we only figured on one. . . ."

"Then we'll just double what we're going to dish out to the first one," Polk whispered. "The hell of it is, they're loaded for bear."

As the guards approached Polk suddenly lunged at Blackrock Charlie. He wrapped his hands around the old trapper's neck and the two men swerved around the bull pen cursing and kicking at each other.

"Git this damn hellion off me!" Blackrock yelled loudly. Two or three of the others jumped into the brawl and soon had Polk's arms locked behind his back. He struggled in seeming earnestness, swearing luridly in his best Argentine lingo. The guards stared, pop-eyed, and one of them howled drunkenly.

"What's goin' on here! Damnation—put a bunch of hogs in a pen and they start chawin' each other's ears off."

"Take this loco killer outa here!" Blackrock bawled.

"We will like hell!" the second guard grunted suspiciously. "But we'll beat the liver outa him for you. Here, Joe, pull your gun and keep an eye peeled on these jiggers, while I go in and straighten that hairpin out."

Joe slid the tray of food through a horizontal slot onto the table, then unlocked the barred door. He leveled a big .45 and stood straddle-legged in the doorway while his pardner strode in with a drunken leer. He made an immediate

lunge for Polk, flailing with his arms.

Blackrock Charlie seemed to stumble forward at the same time, getting in the guard's path. Polk sidestepped lithely. He grabbed up the tray of steaming food and swung as if to fling it at the guard in the cell. Then without warning he pivoted and threw the whole mess straight into the face of Joe. He followed up with a wild leap as Joe went backward, cursing. The .45 roared harmlessly and a second later Polk was on him, assisted promptly by two of the other men. They wrenched away the gun, smashed it downward on Joe's head. Bones crunched and the guard went limp under Polk.

In the cell the scuffling also ceased as abruptly as it had begun. The second gunman was also stretched on the stone floor. His face was pasty and he was out cold. Blackrock Charlie had his gun clutched in a gnarled fist. He hefted it with satisfaction, grinning at Polk. Kansas Coombs had the other .45.

"Not bad," the farmer crowed. "But we better not hang around gloatin' about our luck."

"Right!" Polk said crisply. His blue eyes were shining. "More guns in the hardware store—and an open road from there on out."

"We hope!" Blackrock Charlie echoed grimly.

They pounded down the hall toward the rear, Coombs yelling: "If anybody heard this ruckus, we're most likely sunk!"

"And if nobody heard it, we're plumb loco with luck!" Polk bit out. And even as they reached the alley door, another door at the front slammed and an excited yell lifted. Lead burned down the corridor as they spilled out into the yard. Coombs, Mills and a couple of the others made an instant break for the stable at the rear, according to their prearranged plan, while Polk and the rest wheeled toward the hardware store.

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TWO crouching figures came racing along the alley from toward the center of town. They began pumping shots at Polk's exposed group. Instantly Coombs and old Blackrock Charlie

jammed their heels into the dirt and blazed away with their own weapons in the uncertain light. One of the gunmen pitched onto his face, while the other darted into a doorway and disappeared.

Polk did not wait to see any more. He darted on into the hardware store with his men, finding himself in a storeroom piled high with packing cases, saddles and all sorts of gear. More gunshots sounded from the stable, while the man who had come through the jail opened up, using a rifle, from the sound of it.

A lanky storekeeper with a brown canvas apron on came barging in from the front of the hardware, a pair of spectacles shoved up on his forehead. He skidded to a halt, staring at the grim-faced group with slack jaw and blinking, fearful eyes. Polk snatched the man by the shirt collar and snarled savagely while he lifted a menacing fist under a twitching nose.

"Listen, hardware man! We're jail-breakers, and we're twice as desperate as we look. We're organizing a war against Hand-owned enterprises, incorporated, and we're prepared to kick the teeth out of anybody that smells like a Hand-owned hombre. Does that make you for or against?"

"Luke Gruber's okay," Ben Stone said quickly. "Him and me come West together. Give him a little wind and he'll tell you."

Polk slacked his grip and Gruber shook his head to see if it was still hitched to his shoulders. "Sure, Ben, I didn't have time to recognize you." The store man's eyes were big. "Gosh, have things really busted loose at last? I been praying for this for a year—but my God! Lucky Hand has got a regular army behind him—"

"Never mind that," Polk said grimly. "It may cost heavy in lives, but after this break, Hand will really shut down on you if he gets the long end of the stick again. Dish us out some guns now, pronto, before we get a bunch of toughies on our necks."

Gruber nodded. He ripped open the door of a glass show case and began passing out guns, side-arms and one or two rifles. Polk got a nicely balanced .41 six-gun, an old-timer, evidently second-hand, but in good shape. He emptied two boxes of cartridges into his pockets, then

slammed a full belt around his waist. Already two or three of the men raced for the back door again and began a chancy break for the stable to rejoin their pards. Again a thunderous chorus outside told of the battle getting thicker.

Polk was about to head for the yard, when the front door of the hardware opened and a small figure darted in. It was Cuff Cameron. The button made a headlong dash through the store, nearly colliding with Polk in the gloom. Polk grabbed him by the arm.

"Hold it, compadre! Where you going so fast?"

Cuff stared at him. The boy's face was white as a sheet, and his freckles stood out like rust spots on a brand new dish pan. "Gosh, Polk—all hell seems to have busted loose around here. I heard the shootin' out back and come through—Oh, golly! I thought you were in *jail*!"

"I was, kid," Polk nodded. His lips came together in a hard line. "I don't know what's going to become of your dad—I'll do my best, but he hasn't done much to win the respect of the farmers around here. Tell me this. Where's Morg? Have those snakes got to him yet to pull their dirty work?"

Cuff shook his head, still looking dazed. "I don't know. Last I seen of him he was headin' for Lucky's Casino with a coupla hombres. He wouldn't let me come with him. I—I been lookin' for my sister or my dad. But I can't find 'em. . . ."

Polk laid his hand gently on the boy's shoulder. "Listen, Cuff. Your sister—she helped us break out of that damn' jail. She's defied Lucky, and I'm afraid that's going to get her into trouble, if it hasn't already. I'm making Julie my personal responsibility."

Cuff was as close to tears as he had ever been for years. He clutched Polk's sleeve. "I guess I don't have to tell you—I'm on your side, Polk. I believe you when you say Bughouse Morg is your brother. Somehow Morg's been different since he met you at the river yesterday. He's—"

"Different?" Polk echoed. Hope tugged strongly at him. But a thunderous roar of guns outside jerked him back to realities.

"Wish me luck, kid."

"Gosh, you *gotta* win, Polk!"

CHAPTER SIX

Landboomer's Trap

THESE was no question now that the jailbreak had really ripped things wide open in the town of Stovepipe. Gruber and Ben Stone had ducked along to other stores and saloons and had succeeded in rounding up a number of their friends who were ripe for a real war to the finish against the hog-rule tactics of Lucky Hand and his cohorts. But many others, both townsmen and farmers were milling in indecision as three or four gun battles broke out in various parts of town.

Polk realized he was too late to risk a dash for the stable to rejoin his jail-breaking compadres. A cluster of gunmen were pouring deadly vollies into the wooden structure. A wild yell of defiance lifted from Blackrock Charlie as the beleaguered men answered with stabbing lead. Admonishing Cuff Cameron to stay put in the hardware storeroom, Polk climbed through a small window in the end and dropped to the ground in the narrow space between Gruber's and the next store building. He was about to plunge toward the back alley, when a scuffle behind him brought him pivoting around. He dropped to his knees as a shot whistled over his head.

In the fast waning light he saw a burly giant of a man in a terrific battle with three others who had leaped on him from a side door of the other building.

"It's Morg!" Polk found himself whispering. "I don't know which side he's fightin' on—but blood is thicker than gunsmoke, any day of the year!"

Without hesitation he raced up the narrow opening and threw himself into the fray. Morg was towering with his feet spread wide, his eyes gleaming, and white teeth flashing in that matted black beard. He swept two of the attackers into his brawny arms and laughed at their hammering fists. The other man came backing toward Polk, snarling, dragging out a gun. He chopped it down toward Morg's surging figure.

Polk leaped, brought his own weapon arcing down. The fellow dropped under the crushing blow, even as his gun ex-

ploded with a roar. Morgan Safford let out an enraged bellow as the slug grazed him, but his powerful grip on his two struggling adversaries did not slacken.

"Take one of the devils, Polk!" Morg yelled. Polk nodded, reached out and jerked one man around to face him. He let go a sledge-like right against a whisker-studded chin. The man's eyes glazed and Polk flung him contemptuously on top of the first one.

Bughouse Morg, all his attention now concentrated on the one attacker that was left, gripped the fellow's throat and sent his head crashing back against a wall, where it hit with a sound like a popping watermelon. Morg dropped him and turned to Polk with a flashing grin. "That's three of 'em, kid," he grunted. "Let's keep goin'. Us Saffords been down a long time, but we're fixin' to ride high once more. . . ."

Polk grabbed the big man's prancing figure and hauled him up short. He stared into Morg's face. Those black eyes were keenly alive! "You damned wildcat you. Light somewhere a minute and tell me what's happened to you!" Polk spoke wonderingly. "This time yesterday you were crazy as a steer with a belly full of loco weed, and dead set against the name of Safford. Now you act like you've had a handful of sense poured into your big carcass—"

Morg blinked at him, and a bewildered look came into his eyes again. "I ain't sure what *has* happened to me. Wasn't you and me in some kind of dog-fight yesterday, rippin' into each other's throats like a couple of coyotes?"

"We were," Polk grunted. "And I'm damn near crippled yet, what with the things that's happened to me since. The fight ended when a log smacked you one alongside the head. Remember?"

"I don't remember," Morg admitted dolefully. He was scratching his shaggy head. "But that's what must of brought me around. Things been gradually clearin' up for me ever since. In the Casino awhile ago, where a couple hombres was pourin' redeye into me to prime me for a little dynamite and arson party on some farmer. I—I recognized that barroom, Polk. It's where—where Dad was killed!"

Polk gulped and his eyes blurred. "Was

it Lucky Hand who did the dirty work?"

Morg shook his head slowly, his brow furrowed deeply. "Knife Gabon, Polk, *hermano*. But of course Hand ordered it. About six of 'em jumped me that time—left me for dead, I reckon, out on the range. When I come to, I musta been in that loco fog."

"Yeah," Polk growled. "And Lucky just figured you'd make a good hombre for the dirty work. Then too, maybe he planted you at the ferry crossing, figurin' you'd recognize me if I come along, and he'd get tipped off. But it's Hand's own greediness that's licking him. He's been shoving folks around a little too much. Listen right now—it sounds like they're taking this town apart!"

"And we're missin' out," Morg growled. "C'mon, son. We'll show 'em the Safford clan is still alive."

Guns were now barking further down the street, but around the little stable was silence. Blackrock Charlie Mills came ~~slinging~~ ^{ing} out the back door of the hardware as the Safford brothers came by. "Thunderation, son," the old timer yelled. "I was afraid you'd crawled off in a hole somewhere to die." He stared curiously at Morg, then abruptly his seamy face split in a grin.

"I'm guessin' the Safford boys are hittin' the vengeance trail!"

Polk wheeled suddenly on the old wolfer. "You see that fiesty Cameron button in there? I told him to lay low."

"Nobody in there now," Blackrock grunted.

"Tellin' my ferry pard to keep away from trouble is like advisin' a wild young pup to stay out of the meat house when the door's open," Morg put in, laughing. "My gosh, Polk—there's hell poppin' down around the Casino. . . ."

Polk nodded and the three companions sprinted down that way. The old, fortress-like ranch-house was the center of a milling, shouting crowd of irate sodbusters and townsmen.

"Lucky's whole army run in there like rats diving into a hole, when we beat down their ears at the stable," Blackrock panted, as they neared the crowd. Just then streaks of fire cut from several windows of the Casino and the besiegers scattered like quail. Some of them shot back,

but their lead had no effect on the solid walls.

Suddenly a cool, mocking voice welled out loudly in the gloom. Lucky Hand himself was evidently speaking through a megaphone, but was keeping inside the building. It was impossible to tell just which window he was stationed at.

"I'll make a deal!" the landboomer called. "We'll hand out Colonel Cameron for you to work on, and you let the rest of us pull out of the state! Otherwise, we can hold out here for weeks and pick you off like quail one at a time."

"He's right," a farmer growled. "That damn' place is built like a fort. And it's the banker that's been puttin' the squeeze on us. Tell 'im okay, Coombs."

"Hold on," Polk interjected hastily. He shouldered through the crowd to where Kansas Coombs and a few other leaders were grouped. "That double-crosser would get outside here and then mow you down with lead. Besides, Cameron has been in Hand's power all the time. If it hadn't been for his money none of you would ever have got a start here. Tell him it's surrender, or fight!"

"Polk Safford is right, men," Kansas Coombs argued strongly. "The Saffords still own the original patented land here, by rights. It was stole from them before this town was built and the settlers brought in. You be spokesman, Polk."

One by one the others nodded their assent, and Polk raised his voice. "It's give up or wipe-out, Hand," he yelled. "We're not interested in your kind of bargaining."

"That sounds like Safford," Hand mocked. He laughed heavily. "Here's another deal then, Safford. You walk in here with your hands up, or I'll turn Julie over to Knife Gabon and his gunmen. I've found out she's too much of a hell-cat to handle anyway."

The shock of that rocked Polk clear to his heels. Behind him Morg let out a low grunt of rage, and Blackrock Charlie swore softly.

"Speak up, Safford," Hand called impatiently. "I'll make it a fair exchange—you for the girl."

"Don't do it, Polk," Ben Stone whispered. "He wouldn't treat the girl he aimed to marry that way."

"He'll do what he says," Blackrock growled. "The dirty skunk. Trapped in there like he is, and he's devil enough to strike a bargain like that, just to rob us of our leader."

A ragged sigh broke from Polk's dry lips. "All right," he shouted. "Hold fire—I'm coming." He started a slow stride forward. The crowd of farmers was deathly silent. There had been no hesitation in Polk's mind. He knew he was walking straight into death—but there was simply nothing else a man could do. Silently he cursed the cunning brain of the land-boomer, who had been smart enough to realize Julie Cameron already meant more than life to him, more than any consideration. And even if that were not so, his choice would have had to be the same.

"The side door!" Lucky's mocking voice came now. "We'll let the girl out as you come in. . . ."

Boots pounded heavily behind Polk and Morg was beside him. The big man's hand grabbed Polk's collar and a second later Morg was dragging him roughly toward the side door. Startled yelps broke out from both sides, then Lucky Hand laughed.

"Oh, it's Bughouse Morg! That's right, Morg, fetch 'im to me, boy!"

Polk grinned and Morg chuckled harshly. "The ruse is workin', son. He thinks I'm still loco. Maybe two of us will stand a show in there!"

The side door was jerked open and they could see Julie, pale faced and shaken, in the strong grip of two beetle-browed gunmen. "Step inside, Safford," someone grunted from inside, when he hesitated.

Shoulder to shoulder he and Morg went through the doorway. Instantly the heavy door was slammed shut, leaving Julie still inside!

"They—they tricked you," Julie quavered. "You shouldn't have come, I tried to warn you, but they kept me quiet."

"Bring them in here!" Lucky Hand's smooth voice chortled from the next room. "All of them—including Morgan Safford. Didn't you suppose I'd know Morg had come to his senses, after what he did to my men in the saloon who were supposed to get him drunk?"

"Damn'!" Morg bit out.

"We're not licked yet," Polk rasped.

THE brothers were grabbed by a half-dozen gunmen and harshly ordered along the hallway they were in. Polk managed to catch the girl's eye with an imploring glance. "I was afraid they wouldn't turn you loose," he admitted. "But it was worth a try. I suppose they're keeping your dad locked or tied too, eh?"

The girl nodded miserably. "And Cuff. He managed to get in earlier and hit one man over the head before they grabbed him. They'll kill us all now." She looked shattered and forlorn, as if her world had suddenly crumbled around her head.

"We won't kill *you*, my dear."

Lucky Hand smiled at his prisoners coolly as they were dragged before him in an office opening off the big saloon and gambling hall. That room had been dining and living room for three generations of Saffords, and had witnessed many a frontier dance with guests riding in from forty miles around. An era that was gone beyond recall, Polk thought bleakly. Gabon and most of his renegade army were firing from windows of the great room, though sounds of battle also rolled out from other parts of the rambling old ranchhouse.

Colonel Cameron and Cuff were already here in the office, watched warily by other gunmen. The girl went sadly to her father and he put his arms around her.

"Touching," Hand purred mockingly. "Too bad you had to be such a fool for honesty, Cameron—you, with a nice swindling charge against you in another state. If I hadn't needed to force you in every move here, if you'd worked with me willingly, you could have been rich again. As things are, you leave it all for me and Julie. Because of course she's going to be my wife—I really enjoy her fine spirit. It will be fun breaking it. . . ."

"I'll break your damned neck, if I ever get my hands wrapped around it," Polk stated flatly.

"Don't worry, I'll see that doesn't happen," Hand said. He raised his voice, "Gabon!"

The yellow-toothed sheriff came in, swaggering. "We killed off half a dozen in that last round, boss. And never got a scratch on this side. They've tried burning the place, but with 'dobe walls and a tile roof, they can't get nowhere."

"We can hold out indefinitely," Lucky agreed with satisfaction. "But we might as well stop it while there are still fools enough left to work for us on the land. We'll take the Saffords up on the balcony, where they can be seen and heard. Throw the others somewhere for now—"

"Don't put us in the cellar—please!" Cuff Cameron whined suddenly. "There's spiders down there!"

"Then that's the ideal place," Lucky sneered. "Put the Camerons in the cellar. Maybe my blushing fiancée will be glad to comfort herself in my arms, after a siege among the spiders. . . . Now, you tough-nut brothers! Up to the balcony with you."

Polk and Morg exchanged lightning glances. Cuff Cameron's frantic plea had stirred within each of them a memory long forgotten. That button knows what he's doing, Polk thought. But he had no chance to think further along these lines, because the Camerons were now herded toward the center of the house and the cellar stairs. Polk shot Julie one last, reassuring smile, then wiped it from his face quickly as Knife Gabon grabbed him.

Two small rooms perched like a watch tower atop the old adobe. Opening off one of these was a railed balcony where Race Safford had liked to sit of a summer evening, surveying the rolling grasslands of his far-flung domain. Polk and Morg gazed down bitterly at the sprawling buildings of the town, as Knife Gabon curtly ordered them onto the balcony. Lucky Hand waved a white piece of cloth over their heads and the fire below ceased. The men looked up.

"So you decided to use sense, huh?" came the rolling cry of Blackrock Charlie from behind a wall below. The old wolfer raised up.

"There are twenty rifles trained on you men—so just stand where you are and listen," Lucky Hand bellowed.

"To hell with your parleys!" Kansas Coombs roared angrily. "You've showed us what your word is worth already. You ain't—" The oldster broke off his speech to stare up at the balcony. "Oh, oh! They got the Saffords up there on the balcony, so they ain't killed them yet!"

"Order them to lay down their guns—them and all the rest," Hand commanded

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Polk, while Gabon jabbed him in the back with a gun. "Tell 'em it's complete surrender or death to all the prisoners, and to the dozen men standing out there under our rifles. Remind the fools the law's on our side. They're bucking civil authority."

"Tell 'em nothing!" Morg blared. "These devils—"

"We got to comply," Polk declared hollowly. But at the same time he jammed his elbow into Morg's side. "We got to think of the Camerons—"

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Morg agreed sadly. His dark eyes glittered.

"What is it this time, Polk?" came Blackrock Charlie's query.

"We're licked anyway," Polk yelled down. While he spoke, he covertly watched the two men behind them. Gabon relaxed and the gun barrel began to droop slowly as Polk continued. "We can't prove Hand stole the land from our dad. I guess there's nothing you can do but—"

It was Morg's wild Comanche yell that cut him short as the bearded man threw himself backward crashing into Knife Gabon. At the same instant Polk whirled and lunged at Lucky Hand. The land-boomer spilled backward, enraged screams ripping from his throat. It was a desperate gamble the Safford brothers were taking, and once started, it was victory or death. .

CHAPTER SEVEN

Saffords Come Back!

BELOW in the yard, Blackrock Charlie and the others witnessed that startling tableau on the balcony with startled eyes. But they were quick to realize the Safford brothers were showing them in action that the fight was not yet over.

"And they got some plan," Blackrock told Kansas Coombs as the bunch of them dove again for cover. "Pour lead into them downstairs windows now, before them gun hands realize what's goin' on."

While gunfire again ripped out in the gloom of the yard and was answered by curses and rolling thunder of guns on the part of the renegades, Polk and Morg battled the two leaders up above, in one of the small rooms. Polk's first blow

had sent Lucky Hand spinning backward, to crash against a wall. His sixgun went flying to skid into a corner. Polk grinned, and dove forward.

Morgan Safford and Knife Gabon were battling for possession of the sheriff's rifle. Morg now ripped it from Gabon's hands, but instead of using the weapon, he flung it through the door and over the balcony.

"It was you that killed dad!" Morg yelled. "And you gave me two years of loco hell. Now, hombre, you pay—"

His great hands closed on Gabon's scrawny throat. The sheriff's eyes popped in terror and pain, and choked screams welled from his blood-flecked lips. Morg's tremendous strength bore him backward, bent him like an ashen bow. Bones crunched sickeningly and a second later Morg swept Gabon's kicking, lifeless figure high into the air and bore him to the balcony edge. He flung the body far out, then turned, brushing his hands in grim satisfaction.

Lucky Hand eluded Polk's desperate grasp with the agility of a fox. He was yelling loudly for the help of his gunmen. Seeing the end of his segundo and fearing a dose of the same for himself, he scrambled frantically toward an inner doorway as Morg turned. He dove through into the other room, slammed and locked the door.

In there he howled defiance. "He ain't so smooth and cool now," Morg said, grinning. "Shall we bust the door down?"

Polk shook his head. "Leave him there, *hermano*. He's asked for what he's got coming. Let's head for the cellar. . ."

It was not all clear sailing as the brothers began their plunge down the stairs to the ground floor. They met three powderburning gunmen coming up. With Gabon's rifle and Lucky Hand's sixgun, they met the trio. They plunged on, three dead men behind them on the stairs. Skidding into the downstairs hallway, they darted for the cellar stairs as more renegades triggered lead from the opposite end. A second later they were through the door and legging it down the steep stairs into the pitch blackness of the cellar.

Polk struck a match, in the pale light of which the eyes of the three Camerons glowed weirdly. They were all trussed securely. Polk and Morg did not stop to

untie them yet, but began frantically tossing everything combustible under the cellar stairs. Morg lit the pile of broken furniture, boxes and general refuse from the Casino.

Upstairs the cellar door was ripped open, but the gunmen tumbled backward as flames roared up the stairs, aided by the sudden draft. "All right, you fools—you'll die like rats down there," a gunman screamed. "There's no other opening to the cellar."

"Which is where he's wrong," Polk said, grinning, as he stooped to untie Julie's bonds. Morg loosened Cameron and the boy. Cuff sat up, grinning, while Julie pressed Polk's hand briefly.

"I've already told 'em about the secret tunnel out of here," the button said. "We better be gettin' in it, before that fire cooks us like roastin' rabbits."

"I'm hoping it's still open," Polk said. He slid back a wooden panel to disclose a dark opening. His mind went back to boyhood days, when he and Morg had played in here.

"It was built for real Injun wars,

though," Morg told the Camerons. "Usta open out in that gulch over across the street."

"It still does," Cuff grinned. He darted into the tunnel. "Comes out in a pile of bottles and junk behind Ole's Saloon now. This is how I come in awhile ago. I found it a few weeks ago."

Behind them the cellar had become a roaring inferno of flame. Boots pounded the floors overhead and guns thundered. "They're fightin' a losing battle now," Morg grunted. "This 'dobe building can't be burnt from the outside. But there's plenty wood floors and partitions that'll go up in a hot hell now. It's a devil of a thing to do to the old home, Polk."

"Right," Polk agreed, swallowing a lump in his throat. "But it was the only way to end this thing for good and all. Come on, let's get out of here. . . ."

FIVE minutes later the five of them were picking their way up out of a debris-littered gulch behind a line of new buildings across the street

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from Lucky's Casino. On top of the bank many unarmed townspeople were clustered. Ben Stone, sided now by a gray-haired old lady with sober eyes, greeted them with amazed shouts as they came up over the bank. Others clustered around as the farmer hammered Polk's shoulder.

"How in God's name did you do that trick?" he roared. "Look here, folks! All five of 'em. Safe and sound! It must have been you that set the place afire on the inside. Look how she's burnin' now, Polk."

The old 'dobe was a ghostly sight in the gloom. Nearly every window glowed weirdly and the yard outside was becoming brighter. "The 'dobe walls will keep her from spreading to other buildings," Polk said. He raised his voice to those who, guns ready, were crouched behind stone walls along the opposite side of the street.

"Watch out, gents! Here come the renegades!"

But all the fight was gone out of Lucky Hand's gunmen as they came from the flaming building. They all came out with hands flung high. Blackrock Charlie and Coombs and their men soon surrounded the defeated gunnies.

"Where's Lucky?" Coombs growled. "What become of your boss?"

"I dunno," one renegade grunted. "Maybe a bullet got him."

"There he is!" Cuff Cameron shrieked suddenly. His trembling finger pointed to the balcony.

The landboomer was trapped! Behind him, even as they stared, horrified, yellow flames appeared in the doorway of the upper room.

"Look out!" somebody yelled. "He's got a rifle!"

Polk let out a grunt and grabbed Julie Cameron by one soft shoulder. He shoved her roughly down, even as Lucky Hand began firing, point-blank into the crowd below. Two men went to their knees, and a woman sank down with a low moan before Polk Safford jerked a rifle roughly from the frozen fingers of a staring farmer and threw it to his shoulder.

But he needn't have bothered. Because by now other men were shooting at the lone man on the balcony. A dozen leaden

slugs bit into the landboomer's tall body, and a second later he crumpled, then abruptly pitched headlong from the balcony. His body dropped like a stone, hit the ground with a sickening crunch of bones.

Gusty breath went from Polk Safford's lungs. He turned to Julie instinctively, and to his great joy she came to him, arms out-stretched. Their lips met in a soul-shaking kiss.

Yet each of them knew sadness. In all, it was a sober crowd that began caring for dead and wounded, while others herded the prisoners toward the stone jail up the street. There were adjustments for all to make, and for many there would be vacant places in the hard-won homes.

"I'll go back east and straighten out those fraud charges against me," old Colonel Cameron said gravely. "I know now the whole thing was Hand's clever work, just as this deal on the old Stovepipe range was. There's money in the bank, lots of it, Polk. And more coming in all the time from those who are buying the patented land. It all belongs to you Safford boys. . . ."

Suddenly many hoofs were pounding on the hard dirt streets. A dozen trail-weary cowboys approached, guns in their hands, regret on their faces as they realized they were too late for the action, and stared up at the flaming 'dobe.

"Who the hell are they?" Morg blurted, staring. "Look like Texicans to me."

"No foolin'!" Polk said proudly. "And they got my herd of beef breeders waiting at the ferry crossing. I don't think you and me were ever cut out to be rent-collectors, *hermano*. There's still open grazing land over in the Hornets, I'm thinking. How about letting the farmers and storekeepers run Stovepipe to suit themselves, and pay us what they figure we got coming—when they can. You and me can roll west with those cattle and build up another ranch. Does it listen?"

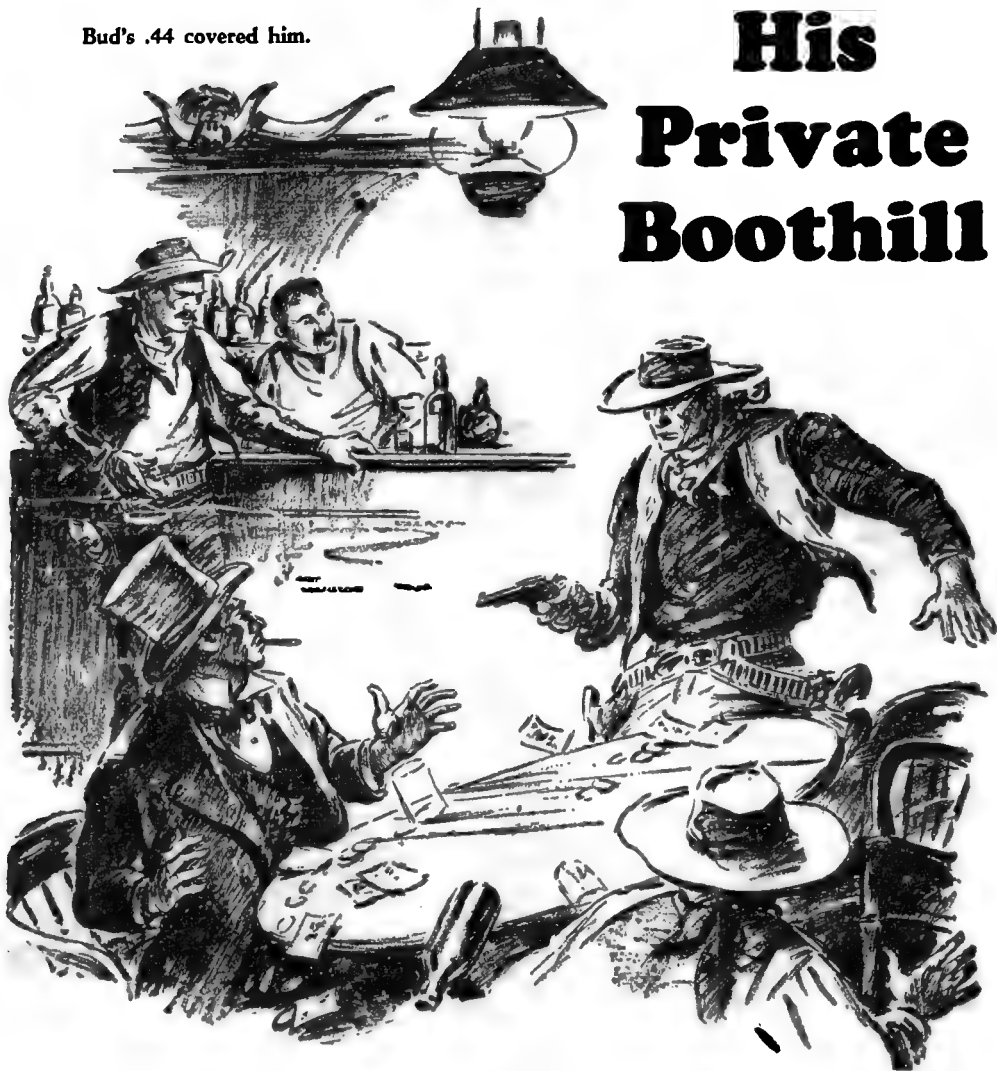
"It does!" Morg roared. "When do we start?"

Polk turned to Julie. "When?" he asked softly.

"Tomorrow!" she whispered. And the one word held a whole world of promise. She took Polk's hand in hers. . . .

THE END

Bud's .44 covered him.



His Private Boothill

By Ruel McDaniel

In Broken Bow, Bud Parker sought the secret of his brother's death. . . . At the hands of a badge-toting killer, whose private Boothill needed its last—and thirteenth—corpse!

ENJOYING the rare luxury of sleeping after sun-up, the tall Texan rubbed his eyes, blinked and listened. "Who is it?" he demanded, as the second knock sounded at his hotel-room door.

"Uhm," came a grunt from outside.

The Texan brushed coal-black, tangled hair from his ruddy forehead, reached under his pillow, gripped the butt of his

single-action .44 and eased out of bed. He unlocked the door, stepped aside and yanked it open.

A short, dark-faced individual with one eye black and closed, looked at the Texan slowly from head to foot. The Texan remembered having seen him washing glasses and running errands around the Nugget bar and gambling hall the night before. "Come in, Injun Joe," he invited.

The sad-faced Indian held a small oblong box in the crook of one arm. Suddenly he shoved it out to the Texan. "You named Parker? Take this," he muttered and was gone.

Bud Parker sat on the edge of the bed and turned the little box over in his hand. The mystery of the box was no deeper than the mystery of the Indian's calling his name. He had ridden into Broken Bow only the evening before, told nobody his name, and he even had taken the precaution to sign a fictitious handle in the hotel register.

Still fingering the box, unopened, he ran through his mind the brief events of the night before. He had registered, stabled his horse, washed up and gone down to the Nugget—for a purpose. The hotel clerk had told him it was the biggest gambling joint in town.

He had tossed off a couple of quick ones at the bar and then drifted over to a poker table, presided over by an oldish dealer with a pale face, pouchy eyes and a large watch-chain strung across a red velvet vest. Instinctively, Bud Parker knew this man ran the Nugget.

He bought twenty dollars' worth of chips and sat in the game. An amateur could have told in a few minutes that the gent with the red vest was stacking the cards on the rest of the players. Finally, Bud got tired of it and told the gambler what he thought. The gambler reached under the table and Bud's .44 covered him before he could bat an eye.

"I'll be seein' you later!" Bud had promised, and backed out of the Nugget. He walked on to the hotel and had gone to bed.

Now, he felt instinctively that this package had some bearing on his activities the night before. He reached in the pocket of his tan corduroy pants, hanging there on the head-post of the bed, and got his knife. He ripped the cord around the box and removed the colored tissue paper.

He removed the lid of the box, tore away more tissue paper. There, artistically placed in the box, was a fresh red rose. Its stem was about eight inches long, with fresh green leaves on it.

He picked up the fragile flower and saw a tag tied around the stem. He turned

over the tag and read a plain figure 13 on it. He turned the stem around in his calloused hand, touching the blossom to his nose and sniffing. He then put it on the bed and examined the box again. In the bottom was another piece of paper he had not seen before. It was thick and coarse. He took it out, unfolded it carefully and saw scrawled, crude lines on one side. He turned the paper around in his hands and saw now that it was a makeshift hand-drawn map.

At the top of the map was a large dot and the name Broken Bow scrawled near it. A winding line, resembling the Chisholm Trail, led south, to a space marked Texas. A prominent black arrow pointed along the trail toward Texas.

Bud Parker scratched his head and his dark brown eyes squinted in deep thought. Who sent the map? Obviously, it was an invitation to pull his freight from Kansas. But why? Obviously, he thought of his run-in with the gambler, but he surmised that a crooked gambler had many such tiffs. It would be a little out of the ordinary, Bud considered, for the gambler to go to such lengths to order him out of Broken Bow.

If certain people knew the real purpose of his visit to Broken Bow, they might reasonably invite him to leave. But there was no way of anyone knowing why he had come to Broken Bow. Yet Injun Joe had called him by name. . . .

△ △ △

HE DRESSED hurriedly, stopped in the dining room long enough for a quick ham-an', then walked directly to the Nugget. The rose and the map were secondary in his mind now. He had come to Broken Bow on more grim business. He felt the key to that business would be picked up around the Nugget bar and gambling hall.

He made a striking figure as he strode down the plank sidewalks toward the Nugget, and people stopped to look at him. He was only twenty-four, ruddy-faced and firm-chinned. His six feet-one gave him a slender, supple appearance in spite of his one hundred eight-five pounds. He wore a regal black shirt, covered by a gray doe-skin brush jacket and

a wide-brimmed flat-crowned black sombrero. The outside of his bootheels were slightly worn, and that made him walk with a slight shuffle. Spurs clanged on the boardwalk, and two .44's hung low on his thin hips. There was stern business in his eyes.

"Hey, Parker!"

His foot was on the step of the Nugget, and the sound of his name startled him. He wheeled around, his hands resting idly just above his gun-butts, for there was no tinge of friendship in the voice.

"I thought so." A man of about thirty-three or thirty-four, almost effeminate in appearance, strolled up. He wore a thin black mustache above thin, sharp lips. His pinch-topped hat was white, to match his silk shirt. A black bow tie flowed down from his unbuttoned collar. "I'm Marshal Lucian Hard, Texican," he said. "I heard about the trouble you made in the Nugget last night. I'm just warning you, we're tired of you rannies from Texas riding up here and killing our citizens." Bud noticed the man's long, white hands, with fingers as sensitive as a woman's. "I'd advise you to high-tail it out of Broken Bow—pronto!"

The lawman shoved past the Texan and strode on into the Nugget. Bud stood there awhile, pushed his black sombrero on the back of his head and pondered with his chin in one hand. Then he shoved open the batwing doors and walked up to the bar.

Marshal Hard was standing there, downing a glass of whiskey. "I've heard of you; bet yo' life I have," Bud commented. "You're the gent that's set out to beat John Wesley Hardin's record of twenty-one killings. Purty big order, mister."

The marshal eyed him up and down. "I'm not doing so bad," he said casually. "I have twelve to my credit, already. Some of 'em tall Texicans."

Bud downed his drink and looked at the lawman out of squinted eyes. An idea was running through his mind. He started to speak, thought better of it and ordered another drink. The marshal moved away from the bar and through a door at the back of the room.

Bud Parker turned his back to the mahogany, hooked his elbows on it and

propped one booted heel over the brass rail. Only a few stragglers sat idly about the gambling tables and a few cowboys were playing Klondike in a far corner. The gambler who had fleeced him out of his twenty dollars the night before was not present.

Injun Joe stopped polishing glasses and began methodically scrubbing the bar with a wet rag.

"A mule kick you, Joe?" Bud asked. "I saw that black eye this mornin', but I didn't notice that gash over it. It's a daisy, I'd say."

"Uhm!" Joe grunted. He continued his scrubbing.

A moment later Marshal Hard stuck his head out of the door. "Injun!" he yelled. "Bring two bourbons!"

Bud saw the Indian's lips suddenly tighten and fire went to his black, smouldering eyes. "Nice guy—the marshal," Bud commented.

Injun Joe did not even grunt. He spat on the floor and moved on to prepare the drinks.

As dusk enveloped the wild prairie town, Bud Parker walked out of the hotel and down the street toward the Nugget, his spurs glittering in the yellowish light from coal-oil lamps along the street.

As he crossed the entrance of a narrow, dark alley, a low whistle stopped him. "Mistur Parker!" a hoarse voice whispered.

With his hands on his guns, he stepped quickly from the light, pressed his body against the side of a frame building and waited.

"Mistur Parker, a word with you, please."

"Oh, hello Injun Joe. Thought somebody was tryin' to daylight me. What's up?"

The squatty Indian caught him by the arm and led him deeper into the dark alley. "Come with me," he whispered. "I show you. Then, mebbey you go back to Texas." He walked on moccasined feet through the alley, with Bud at his heels.

They came out of the alley onto a dark, unlighted dirt street. Joe walked down this street half a block, then cut up a narrow wagon-road that pointed up a hill. A hundred yards farther and Bud

whistled. They stood in the middle of a graveyard.

"This I show you," Injun Joe said. He pointed to three tiers of graves—four mounds to the tier. "Marshal Lucian Hard's private graves," he grunted. "See, he has spot all marked out for th' thirteen one."

Bud's mouth hung open. The twelve graves startled him, but more startling were the gruesome headstone decorations. At the head of each mound was a human skull atop a narrow plank slab. Out of the mouth of each skeleton protruded a rose!

"He goes in for the dramatic, to say the least," Bud whistled.

"Now you know meaning of rose I brought you this morn'," Joe said. "Mebbe you go back to Texas now?"

Bud looked at the Indian in the gathering darkness. Then he looked at the seventh mound of the twelve neatly arrayed at his feet. This seventh mound was longer than the rest, and something about it instinctively drew Bud to it.

"Brother," Joe said simply. "John Parker. That's way marshal knew you. You and brother look much alike."

Something tore at Bud's heart. His muscles flexed. The palms of his hands rubbed back and forth against the cold butts of his two .44s. For a long time he said nothing, then "What for—why'd Hard murder him?"

Injun Joe grunted. "Same thing," he shrugged. "Fingers Devine—you have trouble with him last night—beat brother out of money. He accuse gambler of cheat. Brother and gambler draw. Marshal shoot brother. That way."

It was all plain to Bud Parker now. He knew his brother's weakness for a fair poker game, and he had usually held his own, even in fast company. He had joined a drive up the trail with five hundred good steers. They brought him, Bud estimated, around five thousand dollars. Other Texans, returning from Broken Bow and Dodge City, reported that John Parker had been killed in a poker game at Broken Bow.

John's death left his wife and two kids in bad shape. That five thousand would give Mary a chance to hire help and run the little spread that John had conquered out of the wilderness of the Victoria coun-

try. And Bud Parker had made it his business to get that five thousand dollars back!

In spite of the turmoil that made his brain reel, Bud could not help looking at the decorated mounds in morbid fascination.

"He sends me up morning with fresh roses," Injun Joe volunteered. "Skulls come from Injun burial mound—over there."

"Who took the money—Fingers Devine or the marshal?" Bud snapped fiercely.

"Uhm, both. Fingers cheat victims out of money. Gives marshal half for protection. Get rich, them two. Many Texans come up trail with steer. Go back, no steer, no money."

Bud pulled his black hat down over his eyes, yanked his gun belt tighter and strode down the hill toward the bright lights of the Nugget. Injun Joe vanished.

BUD halted for a moment outside the doors of the Nugget, adjusted his hat, felt his guns once more and shoved his tall frame through the door. He strolled up to the bar and the raucous talk died to an occasional laugh. The games continued, but without the usual good-natured banter. Fingers Devine sat at the central poker table, and his watery blue eyes flashed to the drawer in front of him, but he made no move toward it.

Bud Parker walked slowly down the bar, his eyes fiercely on the gambler. The thud of his boot-heels on the plank floor made the loudest sound in the big room.

He walked past the closed office door and straight to the large poker table. Several of the players dropped their cards and sat watching the Texan.

"Fingers Devine, you robbed—"

A gun-barrel, jabbed fiercely between his shoulders, stopped Bud's statement. "Raise, Texican!" snapped a cold voice.

Bud elevated his hands and slowly turned to face Marshal Hard. He glimpsed the door of the office standing open and silently cursed himself for his failure to check that room.

"You had your chance to clear out of Broken Bow peaceful," the marshal snapped. "It seems you want trouble. Well, you've got it! Hey, Injun! Here, take off this skunk's artillery."

Injun Joe ambled slowly to Bud's side. For a brief second, he hesitated. The lawman kicked him viciously on the shin. "I said get a move on!" he grated. The Indian lifted the Texan's guns and moved on soft-soled shoes back behind the bar.

Bud Parker opened his mouth to protest, thought better of it and moved silently toward the door at the marshal's command. At the door he halted. Hard shoved a gun-barrel viciously against his spine. "You halt when I say halt, hombre!" he growled.

He followed three feet behind Bud until they arrived at the flat-roofed 'dobe jail. "Lock up this wild coyote," the marshal told Jailer Frank Bush. "I'll tell you what to do with him later."

* * *

Moonlight filtered through the bars of the single window of Bud's cell and the broken rays made stripes on his clothes that looked strangely like prison garb. Hours before, Bud had surveyed every inch of the cell and had decided against any chance of a breakout. The walls were more than a foot thick, the bars of the window were an inch in diameter and firmly imbedded into the hard clay.

By twisting his neck and pressing his cheek hard against the wall, Bud could see the reflection of light from the Nugget.

It was a little after midnight when Bud thought he heard whispering from somewhere around the front of the jail; then he heard foot steps in the office. He moved over to the cell door and listened.

"Uhm."

Bud's ears barely picked up the sound, but it was magnetic to him. He wheeled and peered at the cell window. His two .44s, butts first, inched across the sill. He leaped over and grabbed them. "Thanks, feller!" he whispered.

"Beware!" Injun Joe whispered, and the faintest sound of his feet on the gravel told Bud that he was gone.

He heard a chair scrape in the office, then the thud of the jailer's feet. Bud dived for the iron cot in the far end of his cell and shoved his guns under the old straw mattress. He sat down quickly and rested his face in his hands.

"What's goin' on in here?" Jailer Bush

demanded. He pushed his fat round face against the bars and peered in. Then he inserted a ponderous key in the lock, turned it and swung the door partially open. "Thought I heard voices," he mumbled. He looked at the Texan.

"Maybe I talked in my sleep," Bud said.

"Well, better watch yore step. Sometimes sleep-talkin's dangerous. Sleep-walkin' shore is, 'round here!" He clanked the cell door shut and fumbled with the key in the lock.

As the jailer plodded back toward the front of the jail, Bud sat upright and tried to ponder out the meaning of Injun Joe's action—and his warning. That Joe hated Marshal Lucian Hard was obvious; that he might be willing to help the Texan, in hope of the Texan's killing the marshal, might be possible. But risking his own life to return the guns—and then his terse warning, were too deep for Bud.

The cowboy paced up and down the narrow cell and tried to think out his next move. Idly he stopped and gripped the bars of the door with his strong, calloused hands. The door gave outward!

His heart missed a beat. He eased the door back to locking position, crept back to the cot, sat down and listened. There was a way out—but the jailer still sat there in the office and regularly cleared his throat or coughed. Then, even as he was pondering the situation, he heard the jailer's big feet plod out of the office, down the jail steps and out to the street.

This was his chance. He flipped the cylinders on his .44's, broke them both for a final check, then shoved them into the holsters still at his lips. He yanked on his flat-topped sombrero and tiptoed to the door.

He inched the door open on silent hinges, crept out into the bad-smelling corridor and up to where he could peer around the door-facing and see inside the office. Nobody was in there!

And then like a flash that one-word warning flashed across his mind. He froze in his tracks. Of course! This break was too easy. It was deliberately planned, so he would walk out of that door—into a fuselage of lead. And Marshal Hard would have the thirteenth mound in his private boothill!

Even as he stood there, not moving a

muscle, he heard the faintest sound of scraping boot leather on gravel across the street from the jail. Silently, he watched through the window. Gradually, as his eyes became accustomed to the street darkness, he caught the glint of metal in the faint glow of moonlight. He stood there, sure that murderous eyes were probably already on him, awaiting his exit.

He unconsciously shrugged his shoulders in resignation and was about to turn and creep back into his cell, when a noise, like the fall of a rock or stick on the ground, sounded toward the Nugget.

Something urged him to act in this split second. In that fleeting moment, when the eyes of the gunman across the street were focused on the spot where the noise originated, Bud dashed through the outer door.

Fire cracked from two points in front of the jail. Bullets cut clumps of dried mud from the corner of the jail, and hot lead sizzled off two feet to the right of the crouching Texan. He hugged the wall to the corner, then darted behind the jail, still stooping and weaving. From there he dived into an alley. He raced up this a dozen yards, saw a dim trail cutting into high weeds and leaped into the trail. Rifles still roared from around the front of the jail, but the range was bad.

IT WAS now four in the morning and all but the most persistent habitués of the Nugget had gone home. Concealed in the brush no more than fifty yards back of the Nugget, Bud Parker had grimly enjoyed the frantic search that was being made for him. An hour earlier, he had heard Marshal Hard yell to some man down the street: "Guess the skunk has fogged it. We'll make another check in the morning!"

He eased toward the rear of the saloon and listened to three or four drunks making a noisy exit. He moved along the end wall, discovered a rear door, tried it and found it locked. He listened a moment, heard no sound from inside for a couple of minutes, then Fingers Devine's voice: "Better lock up, Pete. Time to go to bed."

Bud sped around the side of the Nugget, stepped lightly up and through the door.

He was halfway down the room before Fingers Devine saw him. The gambler's pudgy hand flashed toward his gun. But

Bud Parker's draw was far ahead of him.

"Heist them mitts—high!" Bud grated. Slowly the gambler raised his hands. His face paled as the Texan walked steadily toward him, and his lips began to quiver. But he kept cutting his eyes around to spot the bartender. Bud thought he heard a faint noise back in the kitchen of the bar.

"Whatta you want?" the gambler blubbered. "I'll return your measly twenty dollars—if that's what's eatin' you!"

Bud laughed, and it was a laugh to chill any man. "Remember a young Texan, looked a lot like me, played poker with you 'bout three months ago?" he asked.

"I—don't know. So many men come in here. I don't remember—" But the gambler's expression vouched for the lie.

"You remember, all right. You cold-decked him out of five thousand dollars. He was my brother. He squawked when he saw he was cheated. He started to shoot your black liver out—and your pal, Marshal Hard, murdered him to save yore life. My brother's widow and kids need that money. I come to get it!" He advanced toward the gambler. With one gun in his right hand, he reached out with his left and lifted the man's pistol out of its holster. It clanked on the plank floor.

Bud now jabbed one gun-barrel into the gambler's fat middle. "I want that money!" he demanded.

"But—but, I got only half. I—"

"You took it all. If you divvied up with your pal, that's yore trouble, not mine. I want five thousand!" The ice in his voice made the gambler blanch. The man's hands trembled and his voice was little more than a gasp.

"In the wall safe," he managed to mutter.

Bud jabbed his gun into the gambler's back. "Open the safe, then!"

The gambler almost ran to the wall-safe and began turning the two knobs with palsied hands. Finally the lock clicked, the gambler turned a handle and the round iron door swung open.

Bud stood directly behind him. He pressed his gun hard between the gambler's stooped shoulders. "You can drag a gun outa there if you want to—but I'll kill you if you do!"

Fingers Devine blubbered a denial. His trembling hand reached into the round

safe and withdrew a stack of bills. "Should be five thousand there," he moaned. "Now, for God's sake, take that gun out of my back!"

Bud Parker reached for the money. At that same second, he heard the front door whine lightly on its hinges. He scooped the money up and wheeled to face the door.

A gun roared from in the open doors. Bud fell to one side. Fingers Devine groaned. His mouth opened as though he wanted to talk. Then he slowly toppled over on his face on the sawdust floor.

But's two .44's were out now, and blazing. Marshal Lucian Hard ducked behind the corner of the bar and fired twice more. A bullet sent Parker's black sombrero sailing. A second nicked his doe-skinned jacket.

He kicked over a card table and leaped behind it, firing as he jumped. Bullets boomed into the two-inch table-top. Bud fired once at the top of the marshal's head.

He sat there, poised, then, and watched the end of the bar. Soon he saw a slender white hand, gripping a pistol, easing around the corner of the mahogany bar. Bud aimed and pulled the trigger.

Lucian Hard yelled. His gun clattered to the floor with a resounding thud. "You wouldn't shoot down an unarmed man, would you Texan?" he called out shrilly.

Bud's cheeks flexed and his lips trem-

bled. "You would lose yore gun, you polecat! I came here to kill you. Now you talk me out of it!" He dropped his gun-hand in utter disgust and walked warily toward the wounded man. "Come out, reachin'!" he demanded.

The marshal raised up from behind the bar, and blood dripped from his right hand. "What you intend doing with me?"

"You got me, damn' you. I never figgered on this," Bud muttered.

The marshal's left hand flashed to his silk vest. A tiny derringer flashed fire. A thousand stars leaped before Bud's eyes. He weaved far to the left. Both guns roared in the direction of the marshal.

The stars danced away and the roar died from his ears. He blinked. The marshal sprawled at his feet, motionless.

"Whew!" Bud Parker muttered.

"Texican," he heard a low, hoarse voice. "Did do." Injun Joe walked slowly toward Bud. There was a semblance of a grin on his dark, ruddy face. "Bar-tender tied up back in kitchen."

Bud smiled broadly. He slapped the Indian on the back. "Joe, you're all right in my books—bet yo' life!" Then a serious expression clouded his face.

"Want you to do me just one more favor, Joe," he said. When they bury Lucian Hard tomorrow, I want you to see he gets a nice skull and a fresh rose."

"Bet yo' life!" said Injun Joe.

*YOU'RE SMOOTH
ENOUGH
IN A BLACKOUT!*

*YES, IN DAYLIGHT
TOO. I USE
STAR BLADES!*

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"I'm signin' your ticket personal, kid," the big man croaked. "You done lived too long."



SMOKY TRAIL!

By Joe Austell Small

Sometimes the combined weight of pain, exhaustion and despair makes even the bravest man welcome death. . . . How, then, could young Jim Feller hope to pack on his slender shoulders yet another burden from out that fiery, hopeless hell?

CHAPTER ONE

The Button Sees Blood

JIM FELLERS wondered what it was about the big man's eyes that made him think of a rat. Perhaps that sparkle of greed and grim intent gave to them the unnatural animal-like luster. The room was gloomy, and the reflections from the fireplace blaze on the big

Smashing novelette of two Texans—too tough to die!



man's gun could have something to do with his eyes, all right.

Neither this big jasper nor his runty partner, Jim decided, meant him or Pop Carson any good. Even under different circumstances, the boy was sure that he could never take a shine to either of them especially to the slim-faced, weak-looking man standing beside the big hulk. The skinny one was holding the .44 with almost an air of apology, but young Jim

figured the nervous little slinker would rip open a man's belly with a slug and never change expression. If the man were an animal, Jim thought, he could only be a hyena—the kind that slips away with a lion's meal when the big beast's back is turned.

"What d'yuh want?" Pop Carson was

regarding the pair over specs that rested on the lower half of his nose. Save for a flash of surprise when the two thugs had walked calmly into the fireplace room of his little prospecting cabin, Pop's expression had changed little. Pop believed a man oughtn't to show his feelings too much.

"You know damned well what we want!" the big man with the red stubble of beard on his face spoke up. "You been takin' ore outa these hills now for more'n eight years. We know you've made a consid'able take these last two years, and you ain't took no great lot of it down to Spring Valley. It stands to reason you've got it hid out in this here cabin somewhere."

"Don't know you boys," Pop spoke easily, leaned back in the squeaky old rocker and pushed the limping specs far up on his forehead. "You couldn't a'been around these parts long."

"It don't take long to find out who saves his ore in a small dump like Spring Valley—especially if you got a few bills to buy likker with!"

"You're wastin' yore time, boys," Pop spoke conclusively. "There ain't a mite of gold dust in this cabin. Now go on and let us alone!"

"Not so fast, Gran'paw!" the big man's face flushed with quick anger. "We don't aim to waste no time on you and the button there. Fork over, or we'll help make up yore mind for you!"

He eyed the heavy fire poker resting against the lower mantel boards, then glanced at the back-log nestling atop a bed of live coals. "You got some gold dust. We want it!"

"Oh, I got a little dust, all right," Pop spoke in a patronizing tone. "But it ain't up here in the hills. I hid it behind the bank building in Spring Valley. I'm gonna dig it up one of these days pretty soon now, too. This prospectin' life's too hard for a kid and an old man like me."

"Me an' the button here're gonna buy us a little farm down the valley 'bout four miles from town. A place just big enough for a truck patch and a small range for some chickens, two hosses, some old quacking ducks, a few cattle, and one hive of bees. Funny little critters, them bees

Work all day gatherin' nectar from

flowers, an' then sit up all night curing it into honey. Then they die from hard work, and the blasted drones get their honey! You take me now, I'm gonna quit before—"

"The old codger's ribbin' yuh, Binge!" a squeaky voice broke in. It was the first time the little man had spoken. His voice sounded like a rusty knife pulling at tough cardboard.

"Y'old buzzard!" the man called Binge stepped forward, grabbed a handful of the old man's shirt and jerked him roughly to a standing position. He pulled the old man over in front of the fire.

Young Jim Fellers felt anger surge up within him and blot out all sense of reason. He'd never seen anybody lay a hand on Pop. He didn't aim to get used to the sight now.

The thin-faced one was watching his partner and the old man. Jim lunged at him quickly, aiming to push the squeaky-voiced little thug into his partner, and let Jim have a chance to get his hand on a gun.

The ruse worked only partially. The little man hit his partner soundly. The big man grunted in surprise, fell to his knees against the fireplace. For a moment his gun was out of line. Pop went into action then.

He had the heavy poker raised, was about to bring it down when a thin stream of orange flame from the little man's gun licked at his chest. Pop fell on his knees against the wall, tried to right himself, and then crumpled upon the floor, face down. The echo of the gun died.

Jim jumped at him again, had his hands on the big .44. He heard boots scrape the floor behind him. Then the whole room seemed to jolt in front of his eyes. It was mighty dark all of a sudden . .

△ △ △

WHEN the light showed again, Jim was brushing cold water off his eyelashes so that he could see. His face was wet, and the whole front side of his shirt was soaked. There was a dull, stinging ache in his head. The boy's hand found a knot just above his right temple.

The men were standing over him now. One held an empty bucket. The squeaky-

voiced one was talking. "All right, Binge, so I did plug the old geezer! He'd a spilt your brains on the hearth in another second. The kid here's bound to know where that sand is. You can't blame me for—"

"All right, all right!" the big man cut in irritably. "We'll find out or burn his blasted liver out!" He stepped forward, hovered over the sprawled youngster.

"Now look, young fool. You've already caused the old man to get shot. We're gonna find that dust or leave you lyin' beside him. But first we're gonna burn your ears till the ends curl up, we'll sear your arms till—"

"I don't know where the dust is," Jim broke in. "Pop never told me."

The big man scowled down on his captive. His thick upper lip twitched. "Heat that poker, Thin!" His voice was cool and hard.

The little fellow did not hesitate. He bent down and retrieved the rounded iron bar from below the window. When he straightened up, the little man froze to sudden tenseness. He bent closer then and peered outside.

"Binge!" the squeaky voice called out. "Th' whole damned hills are afire!"

The big man rushed over to the window impulsively. He swept the little fellow aside.

"Looks like it's comin' this way too. Strong head wind's blowin' the smoke in this direction."

"Musta caught from that fire we cooked on—"

"Aw, shut up! We got to act fast now! We ain't got time to fool with you, boy. Tell us where that dust is, or we'll

bind you up and leave you here to burn with the cabin. Now, where's the gold?"

"We ain't got no gold up here in the hills. Pop told you—"

"Bind him up!" the man called Binge shouted in irritated disgust. "He's too damned hard-headed to live anyhow!"

CHAPTER TWO

Inferno Gold-Hunt

THE thin-faced man had done a good job. Jim's wrists were bound with narrow rawhide shoe laces. The boy had been dragged into this back room and tied securely to an old hand-made chair.

They had given him another chance to tell where the gold was hidden, of course. But the boy had just sat there, helpless and at their mercy, and stared with contempt at the two men. He'd show them the kind of a man Jim Fellers was! The boy guessed he'd die before betraying the trust of a man like Pop Carson.

There was no light in the small room. A few moments after the footsteps of his captors died away, Jim heard a scurrying of tiny claws on the rough floor. Defiant squeaks came from two sides. Young Jim Fellers gritted his teeth. He was powerful scared of rats. . . .

In recent weeks, drawn with hunger and thirst from a prolonged drouth, they had poured in out of the hills—pack rats, wood rats, and kangaroo rats. The starving rodents would eat anything from food to whang-leather.

An unnatural, reddish glow started coming through the tiny window at his back.



But the rats hadn't sensed danger as yet. They scurried across the room at his feet now, getting bolder. Jim's heart began to pound as more of the desperate rodents poured into the room. Pop and the boy had fought them now for three weeks. It didn't do much good, for two more moved in for every one they killed.

A big rat was standing on his shoe now. In another moment it would be crawling up the leg of his faded blue denim trousers. That old unreasoning madness was creeping upon him again. The boy fought it back with panting fury.

When the evil creature touched the bare skin of Jim's lower leg, the boy cried out. He kicked back wildly with both bound feet. He must have lurched sidewise, too, because the motion was enough to tilt the rickety old chair over and leave him lying on his side, his face resting against the rough board floor. The rats scurried away, but Jim could see their pink eyes looking at him from the darkness. . . .

The door opened then, and Binge stood, slightly stooped, regarding the boy triumphantly. The thin-faced man stood behind him, head craned out to the side in order to see around his big partner's shoulders. He held a lamp in his right fist.

"The fire's gettin' pretty close," Binge said softly, walking closer.

Jim twisted his neck a little, strained to slant his eyes upward. The big face was smiling and confident.

"Ready for us to untie you now?" the big man asked.

"Yeah," Jim said.

Both men stepped forward to work on the thongs. The boy regarded them sullenly. That was fat on the big man's neck, all right, instead of muscle. The man wore a faded brush jumper, duckings, and a wide belt with one of those huge, shiny buckles. Jim already had the man figured as the blustering, scowling horse-whipping kind.

On the other hand, this fellow called Thin reminded Jim of an eel. The little man kept throwing glances over his shoulder. He didn't do it expectantly, but more like hard experience had taught him that the coiled spring of danger never fully unwinds. His close-set eyes always looked up at you from a lowered head. Jim fig-

ured this little man was like a rat on a water-soaked log. He'd drift any direction the wind was blowing. . . .

Jim Fellers stood up. He rubbed the numbness from aching wrists. Their job of unshackling over, the pair stood looking at him expectantly.

"It ain't in the cabin," Jim explained. "Come on outside."

The two fell in behind him. "No tricks, remember," the big man warned. "This gun here's easy on the trigger."

The boy walked to an open space a hundred feet behind the cabin. There was a level plot of ground here more than fifty feet across. Every foot of the open space looked alike. There was no evidence of it having been disturbed at any recent time.

With studied care, the boy stepped off seven paces from a big stump on the rim of the small clearing, using a scrub pine on the opposite side of the open space to guide him. He cut a narrow line in the hard crust of sun-baked ground with a dead fir limb as he went.

Walking over to a huge reddish rock at right angles with the line he had made, Jim repeated the process. He used a young pine to guide him this time. Where the two lines crossed the boy made a small circle with his fir limb. He walked over to the wood shed, pulled out an old shovel and began to dig away the circle.

"Hurry it up, kid!" the big man called gruffly, jerking a frowning face to the north.

△ △ △

THE big man's concern was brought on by slow waves of atmospheric pressure. Heated pockets of wind swirled through the vault of trees and fanned his cheeks. The odor of heated pitch, burning wood and acrid smoke billowed in and permeated the little clearing. The air turned oppressive. An ever-thickening cloud of ash drifted down, and each flake was warm to the touch.

"Musta missed it a little," the boy said straightening up. "Pop could of hit it dead center, but me, I better use the tape line. It'd be quicker now than branchin' out around this hole."

"If you're stallin', kid, just remember—

if you ain't found that dust by the time that forest fire runs us out, you won't never find it!"

"And if I do find it," the boy looked squarely into the big man's burning eyes, "maybe I'd stay in the cabin anyhow. The fire'd sure leave no witnesses. Nobody would ever know you robbed us, shot Pop, nor nothin'. It'd just all be laid to the fire. How do I know you ain't figurin' on leavin' me here, even if I do dig up the dust for you?"

A red flush spread quickly over the big face. Then the big man looked almost affable.

"All we want is that gold, boy! We'll be out of the country before you could trail us any. Find the dust for us and you'll be safe."

"Yeah," the runty man assured. "We wouldn't hurtcha, boy!" He tried to laugh reassuringly. It sounded to Jim like the cackle of a starving jackal upon finding a long-dead carcass.

"O. K.," the boy spoke slowly. "I'll get the tape."

"I'll go with you." The big man fell in behind. He nudged the boy's shoulder-blade with a heavy gun. "And make it fast!"

They left Thin idly thrusting the shovel into crusty ground.

Once inside the cabin, the boy seemed puzzled.

"Now, lemme see. Where does Pop keep that tape measure?"

"Find that blasted tape and let's get out of here!" The big man began truculently. "That damned fire's movin' fast!"

Jim began a systematic, lengthening search as the big man cussed, fumed, and jabbed his gun at the boy in exasperation. Growing uneasiness, desperation, was beginning to show in the shifting eyes. And desperation in a man like Binge was a dangerous thing for his captor. . . .

"I was thinkin' Pop kept that tape on the shelf here. . . ."

"Now look, kid," the big man stepped close, stared coldly into the deep blue of Jim's eyes, "Whatever you're doin', remember this: I want that gold dust and I'm gonna have it, fire or no fire. You got a heap o' livin' to be done yet. But I promise you boy, if you try to pull a fast one, you won't never get the chance

to do all that good livin' yore plannin' on!"

Binge had worked up closer with each outburst. The boy stood straight, met the big man's gaze with a hard stare. Hot anger sent a flush into the blond cheeks. Jim was thirteen now. Mighty-nigh a man. He stood five feet nine already. His shoulders had widened a heap in this last year, but the short blue denim britches that stopped four inches short of his ankles looked a little awkward. Pop wouldn't let him wear a gun yet, either. Maybe he was still a boy at heart, but taking everything into consideration, he was damned nigh a man in other ways, the way Jim Fellers looked at it.

"Me an' Pop have done a heap o' figurin' on buyin' a farm with that gold. It ain't right that it be took from us at gun-point, this way," he said sullenly.

The big man smiled.

"Find that tape," he commanded. The thick upper lip twitched excitedly. "We ain't got no time to lose!"

CHAPTER THREE

Death Race

JIM found the tape on a corner shelf, and took it. The big man grinned appreciatively as he opened the door and urged the boy out. "We haven't got time for another mistake, son." Mere sight of the tape seemed to calm him. "That gold comes to light this time or I'll kill you!"

Jim Fellers didn't doubt the big man's words. . . .

"I been diggin' a little," Thin explained to his red-whiskered partner when they returned. "The kid must have missed the spot a good bit."

Jim measured the ground carefully. He marked a spot a little more than a foot to the right of where he had dug first. The ground for several feet around had been torn by Thin's spade.

When he had dug to a depth of one foot and nothing was in evidence, the boy looked puzzled. He ran this new hole into the old one then. Jim hurriedly widened the shallow excavation. He dug deeper, concern stamped deep on the boy's face.

Big Binge had built a small fire which threw out a light to work by. It also

showed them the exact direction in which the forest fire was traveling, according to wind movements.

Jim raised up from his digging for a moment. He scented the air like a dog on trail. The heat had increased perceptibly in the last twenty minutes. Embers of the tiny fire that Binge had started, and which was quickly burning itself out, unaccountably took on fresh life, flared and exploded, while the flames danced in frenzy.

Suddenly the wind sprang to a greater strength, bending the treetops. The air tension throbbed against the boy's temples. He passed a hand across his face, then dug in feverish haste.

When the boy straightened up again, he looked straight into the eyes of Thin. The little man was staring at him. It looked like he might be afraid.

"It ain't here," Jim spoke flatly. "I couldn't a'missed it this time. It's been took out." The boy turned his head to look at Thin.

"The kid's lyin'!" the squeaky voice rang out. The little man was looking at Binge. "That gold never *was* buried there in the first place! He's just lyin' to cover hisself up!"

The big man had been watching his runty companion closely. Easily, slowly, his gun swung away from Jim and stopped on a line with the little man's stomach. The muzzle came back then and stopped half way between the two. Jim could feel the cold tenseness of the moment. He was surprised at the calmness of his own voice when he spoke.

"A man could of dug that old bakin' powder can up, put the duckin' pouch in his pocket and throwed the empty can into th' bushes purty easy, durin' the time we were gone."

"Why you lyin' little—" the thin-faced man stepped forward, raised a hand threateningly.

"Cut it short!" Binge commanded. His voice was cold. "We ain't got time to argue about a man's honesty. I'm gonna have some action now. You can prove whether he's lyin' or not, Thin, by turnin' your pockets. If he is, I got a solemn promise to live up to regardin' him. If he ain't—"

"You're believin' *his* word agin' mine?"

the little man's voice was almost a whine. He took a step backward involuntarily.

"Shell out, you fool!" the big man was furious. "Can't you get it through that wilted head of yours that every minute we lose now will make it just that much harder to get out of here alive?" He took a step forward, the big revolver now swung straight toward Thin's stomach. "You're gonna turn them pockets of yourn, Thin, or I'm gonna kill yuh—"

The big man stepped forward slowly, like a huge cat creeping upon a trapped, frightened mouse. A stubby thumb eared back the hammer on his long-barreled .44.

The little man winced and drew back at the click.

"Don't do it, Binge!" There was a ring of terror in the thin man's voice. "Let's go . . . Fire's comin' fast! I tell you, I didn't—"

A heavy, monotonous drone was working its way toward them from the forest. There came a faint crackling, as of prehistoric monsters trampling down the brush. Over all, the flutter and eddy of the wind bore strongly through the trees. Jim looked to the sky again and found the purple dissolved to orange. A mellow light glowed from a dozen vistas ahead.

The big man hesitated in his grim march forward. He threw a quick glance at the growing red menace to his left.

When the threatening muzzle of the big .44 strayed momentarily from his stomach, a surge of color swept into the thin face of the little man. A trembling right hand suddenly dipped toward his hip. He fell back and to the side as the black-handled gun came from its holster. It belched yellow flame into the reddish glow.

In spite of his size, the big man was not sluggish in his movements. From the corner of his eye, Binge had caught the betraying downward movement of the thin man's hand. He dropped like a clubbed yearling and swung the long-barreled gun back in line. It kicked his big fist three times, and the bullet from the runty man's gun screamed over his head.

A shocked, panicky expression crowded out the crafty look of victory from the little man's face. He staggered once, then sank to the ground.

Jim Fellers ran. He was a little back of

the big man, slightly outside his line of sight. He made no noise. When the boy looked back as he swung open the cabin door, he saw Binge bending over his slain partner, rummaging hurriedly through the man's pockets.

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JIM heard a low moan when he entered the room. A glimmer of hope surged through him, strengthening him. The boy knelt and felt of Pop's pulse. It was beating weakly. He reached behind a huge picture on the low mantel then, crammed something into his trousers. In feverish desperation he worked the old

doors of a big furnace had been swung wide. A great tree went down, sending through the forest a crashing message of its demise.

Loose rocks and the slanting, uneven ground combined in forming precarious footing, while a relentless wind threw a screen of blinding, suffocating smoke about him. A thousand glittering sparks sailed overhead.

Jim Fellers was getting tired. Pop's body across his right shoulder hadn't felt so heavy at first, but the pace began to tell now. A sharp crack from behind rang out above the popping of saplings and crashing trees. This time the bullet came close. It struck an ironwood limb and

Joe Austell Small, author of the story on these pages, also has a lighter side. He gives it full sway in his hilarious, "Spooks on the Prod," in the July issue of our companion magazine 10 STORY WESTERN. You can have the fun of reading it TODAY!

man to a sitting position, then finally got him over his right shoulder. In another instant the boy was lugging Pop out the back door and down a dim trail.

A bullet tore at the brush to his left. The big man had been too fascinated over his search for gold to notice when the boy had left. But his disappearance couldn't go unnoticed for long.

For a moment, wild panic surged through the boy when he reached a vantage point and stood looking down at the shallow valley below. He had thought the menace was all behind him, that it was a slashing fire, moving evenly. But the hump of earth on which the cabin stood had split the fire, as if the sheets of flame were a huge lava flow. The center fire, eating its way up the slopes, had been retarded.

The prongs of fire on either side were working swiftly toward the river. If they reached it first and ate across the narrow strip and met—the boy and his burden and the big giant behind would be trapped.

Jim moved downhill by way of an old, little-used pack trail. From either side reverberated a boom and roar as if the

whined off into the forest like an angry bee.

The boy turned slightly and flashed a glance backward. The big man was wallowing through the forest. It was hard to gauge distance through the thickening smoke haze, but Jim could tell that his intended slayer had gained considerably.

It was an out-and-out race. He'd have to beat that girdling blaze to the river! He couldn't get tired now.

CHAPTER FOUR

Manhunt Killer

AS THE fire bore down swiftly, it seemed to Jim a thing alive, bent on erecting a barricade along the river and thus cutting off all means of escape. The drouth made it worse of course. Every leaf, twig, even the heavy mat of needles on the ground itself, were brittle dry, forming easy prey for the licking flames.

The boy's throat was parched. His lungs burned. The big man behind had quit shooting because the smoke was too

thick. But Jim knew that Binge was gaining. Next time the range would be short. The big man wouldn't fail.

It was death on three sides and in the middle. Jim wished his head would keep clear. He fought back that swimming, creeping, dizzy sensation. He couldn't pass out now. Else how would Pop get to a doctor?

Fingers of light shot up as each fresh tree was covered, pointed heavenward for a brief moment, and then turned down to earth. The noise had mounted to a high pitch.

Jim was in the flat bottomlands. The river was somewhere ahead, but he couldn't see anything much for the smoke. Tears streamed down a smutty face, cleared out strips across his cheeks. It was getting hard to breathe. His whole body burned and ached.

It would be nice to fall to the ground, to relax in an exhausted stupor. But that would be letting Pop down. Pop wasn't a mealy-hearted old cuss as a rule, but there had been no one to take care of him when Jim's mom and pop came out second best in their argument with double pneumonia.

So Pop said he'd throw a halter around the little tyke until somebody capable of raising a young'un came along. The kid slapped Pop for his trouble, and the old man began to like him right off the bat then. That slap showed courage, Pop always said. And after the first month, maybe it was just as well that somebody didn't come along and try to throw their claim on the kid. . . .

They had laughed, played, and later worked together, and always Pop put back some of the dust and nuggets against the day when he would make his own days secure and, at the same time, leave a start in life for the boy.

That little old ranch in the valley was to be both Pop's security in old age and Jim's start in life. It would have worked out, too, if these two scurvy thieving weasels hadn't busted it up.

Great sheets of flame boiled through the underbrush. The heat withered and blistered. Jim tried to stay near the center of the narrowing strip of unburned tim-

ber, but the flames were eating in from both sides. It even looked like they were closing in ahead. . . .

Jim Fellers realized then that he had lost the race. For those fast-running prongs of fire had reached the river ahead of him, were now throwing up a blazing barricade along the bank. He plodded on ahead doggedly.

There came a gust of shriveling air; overhead a vast sigh. A dozen small bonfires sprang up on all sides. It brought the boy to a halt. He backed away from a space that had been passable an instant before, but now was a blazing cauldron. Jim shielded a scorched face with his free left arm as a thousand red-tailed devils danced at him from all sides.

The man stirred on his shoulder, coughed. Pop was coming to life. It wasn't right that a man so long unconscious should come to life just in time to be burned to death. Jim stumbled then and went down.

He was pulling Pop to a sitting position when the shadow appeared from behind, coming through the red smoky haze. It was the big man called Binge, blackened and soot-stained.

He moved forward in a crouch, as if his bent position would better clear him of the fogging smoke pouring down from overhead. There was a gun in his fist. His voice was hollow.

"Guess we both go out on this deal, kid." The man's thick upper lip jumped convulsively. "But I'm signin' your ticket personal. You see, I like to keep my promises. I even like to kill. 'Specially, I'm gonna like killin' you!"

The gun belched then, and a bullet tore an angry gash in the ground at Jim's feet.

The boy reached inside his coat, pulled out the heavy pistol he had thrust inside his belt before leaving the cabin. Pop'd told Jim it was against God's law to kill. The boy didn't like to go against the Head Range Boss this way. But maybe in some cases a thing like this wouldn't be so bad. . . .

A second bullet burned the air so close to the boy's head that it caused him to dodge. Pop was conscious now. He was muttering something and asking questions. But Jim didn't have time to answer. He

had to stop that advancing giant coming through the smoke haze there.

He'd have to aim right the first time. If that smoke would just clear up a little. . . !

A slashing chunk of lead tore into Jim's right side, spinning him around, paralyzing him for a moment. His gun fell.

The big man was closer; Jim could see his wild eyes and the big, shining buck teeth. He was laughing, too, as he brought the big gun up to fire again.

At first Jim thought that explosion was the pop of a pine tree as it snapped to earth, gutted by the hungry flames. But the sound was too close, too sharp. He looked down at Pop. The old man was braced on a flimsy elbow. The old cap-and-ball pistol was smoking, and Pop was looking ahead.

Jim looked ahead, too. The big man stood still, the big gun dangling in his right hand. He was trying to bring it up again, even as he fell on his face. He sighed once, and lay still.

"Help me up, Jim!" Pop called. "We got to get out of here!"

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JIM FELLERS felt weary. It wasn't that he was ready to give up; it was just that strange hollow numbness inside that made him feel like he was ready to come apart.

"I'll help you, boy!" the old man offered. He was trying to get on his feet now. Pop fell then, and lay still on the ground. He was pretty bad hit, Pop was.

It brought Jim out of his daze. Painfully he knelt and worked the old man back across his shoulder. It was the left one this time. That right shoulder and side felt numb and weak. It took about all the strength the boy had to stand up with that weight on his shoulder. Jim glanced about hurriedly. One thin opening toward the river looked like his best bet. . .

Jim walked carefully. A blazing limb crashed near by, and a heavy tree toppled over with a shower of sparks. He staggered through a patch of fire into a narrow aisle between burning brush, with flames licking at him from all sides. Jim felt a stinging sensation on his right leg, and

realized that his pants leg had caught fire. The hot ash was scorching his shoes.

The heat bore down and seemed to smother him. Jim dared not run for fear of falling. He could not shield himself for holding Pop. The boy started counting and kept time with his steps.

There was no air in his chest now, and none to be had. His lungs were bursting, his tired feet dragged, and courage sifted from the boy's bones, while the skin on his face shriveled. There ahead was another sheet of flames. He'd just have to keep walking. . . .

These flames seemed not to burn so badly as they had at first. His head reeled, and a great encroaching world of blackness opened up with a rush of cold air. Jim Fellows stumbled, went down. The boy and his burden were rolling now, rolling down an incline and on to cool, wet gravel.

They had reached the river . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

End of Hell's Trail

IT WAS silly for them to be holding him back that way. Jim Fellers was trying to get away from that fire, to save Pop. And they were holding him back. They must be crazy to do a thing like that.

"All right, Jim." It was Sheriff Biff Watson's voice. "Take it easy, boy! You're all right now."

The boy could see now. He was in a bed, in a room. There was an oil lamp on the small table near his head. A paper, wedged in the globe guide, threw a comforting shadow over his face. It was all very familiar, and yet a little strange and unreal too. Maybe he was fixing to die. . . .

"Where's Pop?" The boy's face showed sudden concern. His voice was a little hollow.

"Take it easy, son! Lay back down!" Sheriff Biff Watson grinned. "You couldn't kill that old devil! He's got a pretty nasty hole in him, but Doc said it didn't hit no vital spot. Bullet's already been took out."

A cooling sensation of great relief crept up through the boy's stomach. Pop was in the hands of a doctor at last! Pop would be safe.

"Where are we? How'd we get here? I don't remember—"

"Of course you don't!" old Sheriff Biff Watson snorted. "You was plumb out cold. Pop was, too. We'd gone down to the river to watch the fire, try to fight it if she come across. Saw you an' Pop roll down the far bank then and into shallow water. Both of you was afire. If you hadn't hit water, you'd of burnt up afore we could of got to yuh. Brought you both on over to my house."

"Doc's in there with Pop now. You took a slug in your right side. It busted a rib, but you won't die over it! Pop told us all he knew about it."

"They'd a'got us both if it hadn't been for that fire, I guess," the boy began. "I set out to diggin' back o' th' cabin. Missed the old tin can by a hair that first time. Did it on purpose. Went back in the cabin, with the big un' guardin' me, and gave that little fellow's greedy, double-crossin' streak a chance to run wild."

"He found the can, all right. Then, while the big ox was killin' him, I lit out with Pop. When th' big fellow missed me, he come a runnin'. He just knew I'd gone back in the cabin, got Pop and th' gold and lit out. He was sure dead set on that gold. The big fellow caught up but Pop plugged him."

"I thought you said the little man dug up the gold."

"It warn't gold he dug up at all," the boy explained. "It was stink-bait . . . My throat burns, Sheriff."

"Stink-bait! Maybe you oughtn't to be talkin' so much. Here, take another swallow of this red stuff."

"I read a recipe on how to make that stink-bait," the boy continued. "It's bad smellin' stuff, but it's the' best danged cat-fish bait a man can get. Th' recipe said let it age in a tight, warm place. We didn't have no place like that, and besides them consarned rats would've et it up. So I put them stink-bait balls in a little duckin' bag that Pop used to keep his lead for that old pistol in. I put the whole thing in a small bakin' powder can then and buried 'er in the back. I figured that'd be tight and warm enough."

"When the little feller hit that can, he thought it was gold, sure. Didn't take

time to untie the duckin' bag when he emptied it out of the can. Th' big feller took time out to open up the sack, though. And when he found that stink-bait, over which he'd just killed his partner, I guess he was right sore!"

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OLD BIFF WATSON laughed. "You an' Pop deserved to save that gold, son. But the fire wiped out everything. Not enough landmarks left to ever find your real cache again."

"We didn't have no gold up there in the hills, Sheriff." There was a twinkle in the boy's eyes. "Pop buried 'er behind the bank building here in town. Nobody'd ever expect to find it there."

The old lawman chuckled. "Oughtn't to be tellin' me, Jim," he said. "I might dig it up myself."

"Pop'll want you to, I guess, come tomorrow. Think maybe now my arguments about keepin' it in a bank will bring him over. We're gonna buy a little farm in the valley with it, yuh know."

The boy's voice was getting weak.

"I'm gonna go see about Pop now," the sheriff said. "You need a lot of rest, boy."

But Jim continued to talk, as if he were slowly reciting a dream. "Guess I'd of sat right there and burned to death if it hadn't been for them rats. I'm scared of rats."

Something still seemed to be on the boy's mind. He fluttered singed lashes briefly, looked at the man sitting beside him through heavy lids.

"Reckon a man can have courage and still be scared of rats, Sheriff?" There was a tone of uneasiness in the boy's voice.

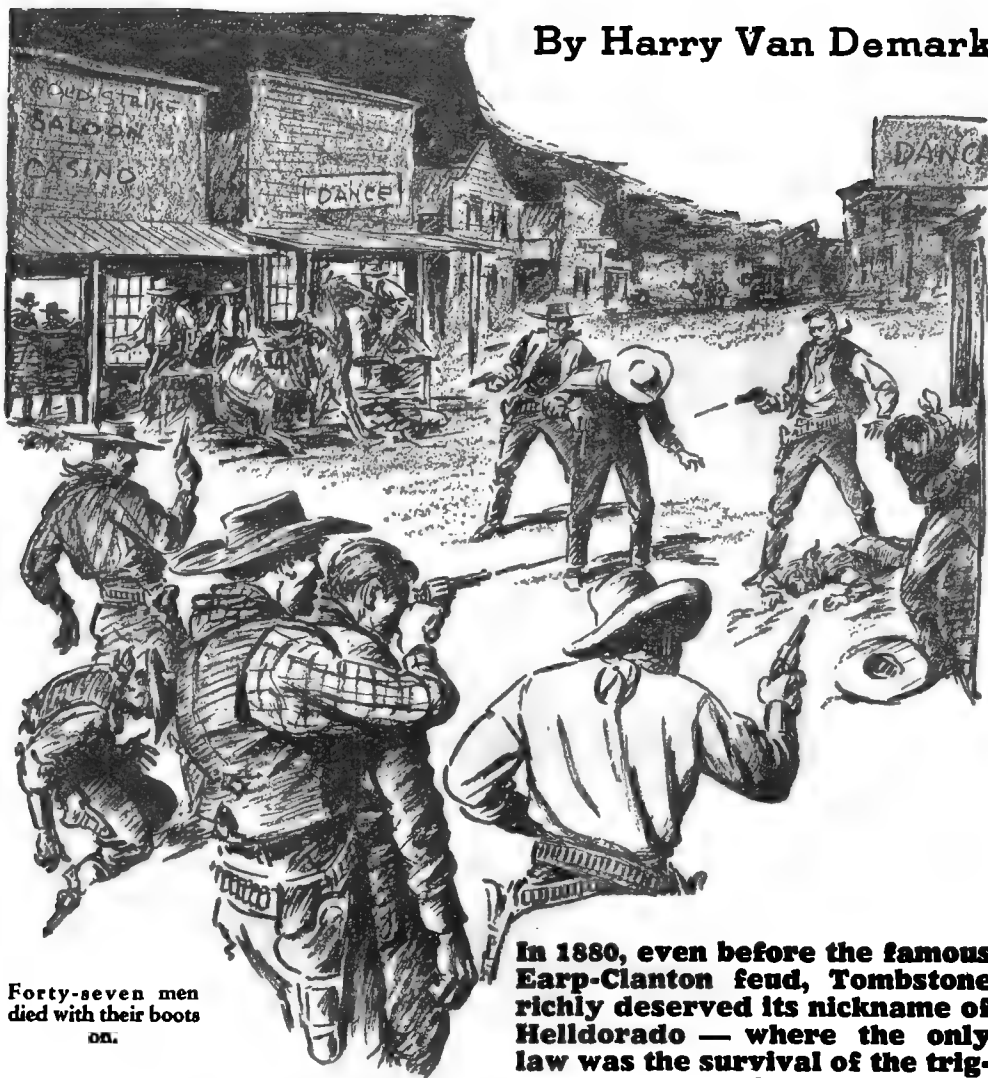
"He can, son," the old lawman's voice carried a tone of assurance. He looked down at the bandaged face and hands, the singed hair, at those blackened, closed eyelids. The boy was sleeping now.

The sheriff's lips moved. He meant to be thinking, but he was talking now, talking out loud. "Sometimes a man can have a heap of courage and still be afraid of rats." The old lawman brushed a gnarled hand carelessly across his eyes. "And in this partic'ler case, by God,—I'll shoot the man who says he can't!"

THE END

HELL'S OWN STAMPING GROUND

By Harry Van Demark



Forty-seven men
died with their boots
on.

**In 1880, even before the famous
Earp-Clanton feud, Tombstone
richly deserved its nickname of
Helldorado — where the only
law was the survival of the trig-
ger-quickest!**

“THE wickedest and cussedest town I ever knew—and I’ve been on the frontier since 1858—was Tombstone back in 1880,” an old plainsman once said. “Whew, but that was a tough place!”

In 1880 Tombstone and her mines were on everyone’s tongue. Newspapers the country over published columns about the marvelous gold and silver finds in the Tombstone country. There were 10,000 men and three hundred women in the town and its environs.

So Tombstone became the new El Dorado, and there was a spontaneous stampede of murderers, outlaws, ex-convicts, hardened frontiersmen and tough gamblers from all points of the compass.

The mining district was near the boundary line between the United States and Mexico, and hundreds of Mexican half-breeds and Indians flocked to the new town to prey upon the tenderfeet there. Cowboys quit cowpunching and went to Tombstone to live by their wits. Saloon-keepers migrated from all over California

and every state and territory in the Rocky Mountain district.

Reports of the extreme wealth of the ledges at Tombstone set the whole West crazy. News went abroad that the Gird and Schaeffelin crowd were taking out five hundred pounds of silver and a dozen pounds of gold from the rocks every day.

All life in Tombstone centered about the saloons and dance halls. If you wanted to find a mining boss, a prospector, an editor or a ranchman, or even a United States marshal, your best bet would be in some saloon or gambling place.

At the bar was a maudlin crowd, subject to no moral restraint. Professional gamblers, cool and calculating, presided at the gaming tables, among them scarlet-lipped women wearing derby hats, dealing faro. The players sat around the tables with silent, anxious faces and a sympathizing crowd looked on. Mexican musicians on elevated seats played colorful music that drowned the clink of gold.

Between each Saturday night and Monday morning a thousand miners flocked down from the hills to try their luck at the gaming tables. Many were left without money enough to pay for a drink when they were ready to return to the mines on Monday morning.

It was during these weekly intervals that most of the murders were committed. If the report of a pistol was heard and someone was wounded or even killed, the games were scarcely interrupted.

The dance halls were great barnlike structures, approximately 60 feet wide by 150 feet long. A fancy bar, 70 feet in length, ran along one side of the hall. Benches of pine served as seats along the walls. Men who did not treat women to drinks several times during an evening were marked as unfit for association with the society of Tombstone.

On many nights the bar receipts would run over \$200. On Sundays it would average from \$250 to \$300. The dancing was free, but the man who did not respond freely to the manager's stentorian cry, "All parties waltz to the bar," became unpopular. The women danced more than fifty times a night. As they could not possibly drink every time they danced, those who abstained were given tickets which were afterward cashed in at the bar.

From January, 1880, to March, 1881, it was a never-ending battle between these lawbreakers on one side and the men who knew no law on the other. During that period forty-seven men were killed with their boots on. At least thirty-five gambling houses on the main street kept their doors open day and night. One of them, the Gold Room, had a capacity of nearly six hundred people.

Most of the shooting affrays started either in a gambling house or dance hall. For instance, in July, 1880, a good-looking Mexican girl named Ponchita came to Tombstone from Sonora. Hank Allen, who was virtually boss of the town at the time, by virtue of having killed one Bill Emmons, fell in love with her.

△ △ △

HANK, a six-footer, about sixty years old, had been a fugitive from justice in the Texas Panhandle before he arrived in Tombstone. He was a dead shot with a pistol. He was not slow in telling Ponchita that he loved her and that she must love him—that it would not only be an honor to receive his attentions at the Golden Eagle dance hall, but safer for other admirers to keep their distance when he was about.

But Ponchita had eyes for a young man of good family named Henderson, just out from Michigan. It was some time before Hank found out that he had a secret rival. One night when Hank had gone over to a neighboring camp, Henderson could not resist the opportunity to drink and dance with Ponchita.

Along about midnight Hank suddenly strode into the dance hall and in a drunken rage shot Henderson through the shoulder. The dancing stopped, and upon Ponchita's assurance of her affection for him, Hank put up his gun.

Henderson went out with some friends, apparently to find a physician, while Hank invited the house up to the bar to drink with him.

Once out of the dance hall Henderson's anger became violent. He borrowed a sawed-off shotgun from a gambler down the street, and still dripping with blood from his wound, loaded it with buckshot. Then, with two companions he went to a

rear window of the dance hall, where he could draw a bead on Hank Allen.

Someone must have warned Hank of the impending assassination, for just as Henderson and his pals were creeping around the corner of the dance hall, Hank rushed outside. One of his pistols flashed out of its holster just as Henderson raised the shotgun to his shoulder. Both weapons exploded simultaneously. Henderson staggered and fell. Allen fell over into the arms of a bystander. Although his chest was pierced by seven buckshot, Hank raised himself on an elbow and took eight shots at the fallen Henderson. In a few minutes more both men were dead.

One Sunday night a Methodist preacher went to Jack Trowbridge, boss of the Gold Room, and asked permission to hold divine service. It was granted. Then, with every gaming table running full blast, the bar sending out its liquor, the Rev. Mr. Hahn stood up and told the story of the Man of Nazareth. Before he had finished his sermon a quarrel ensued at one of the tables and a man was shot.

A bond election was held in Tombstone. Special constables were appointed by the mine owners to keep order on election day. One of them was a Texan named Martin. At the polls there was a quarrel between a big Irishman, who went by the name of Flaherty, but whose real name was Arthur Delaney, and Constable Martin. This started a melee during which eight men and one woman were killed and an equal number wounded.

After the election Flaherty and Martin met in the Lone Star Saloon and renewed their quarrel. A proposition was made and accepted to go out in the street and settle the matter with their fists. Both men laid off their belts and started outside, Martin, however, had a gun hidden in his boot. Just as he reached the door he went after it, intending to kill the Irishman. But Flaherty was too quick for him, took the gun away and shot him dead.

Flaherty was tried and acquitted. But Martin's friends vowed vengeance on his slayer. This led to what was for years referred to as the "big killing."

There were three dance halls in the district known as Hyde Park. Flaherty

was a hanger-on at one of them. Martin's friends swore they would kill him and anyone so bold as to take his part.

The engagement took place according to schedule. Flaherty was killed early in the fray, with two holes through his neck and more lead scattered through his body.

A man on the Flaherty side, named Riley, shot nine of the Martin crowd and did it in a novel sort of way. At the first pop of a gun he walked deliberately up to a Texan and shot him in the eye. Then running his arms between the arms and body of the dead man, he used the *corpus delecti* as a human barricade and shot at will from a safe ambush. When the fight ended he ran to his horse and galloped out of town.

Mike Fitzpatrick kept a dive he called the Side Door. The unlucky chap who got inside found himself "side-doored" until his money was gone. Decent people in Tombstone protested against Fitzpatrick's methods, among them a prominent merchant, George Trent. Mike resented this interference with his business. So one morning he loaded himself a little fuller than usual with rotgut whiskey and set out to do a little slaughtering.

The merchant happened to be away from his store. Mike staggered on up the street, terrorizing everyone he met. He finally wound up in a saloon. There he saw a city police judge, George Halliday. Without the slightest provocation or word of warning he shot the jurist through the heart.

The city marshal, Jack Johnson, had been advised that Mike was on a rampage. He set out to curb him, to take him alive, if possible. But when Mike emerged from the saloon he was flourishing a six-gun in each hand. Marshal Johnson was taking no chances. He rested his Winchester across a well curb and shot him down.

An hour later irate citizens had risen en masse and formed a vigilante league. Suspicious characters were notified to leave. And they left. Tom Carson, a nephew of old Kit Carson, was sent for and became marshal of the town.

He stayed three weeks, then he skipped out to parts unknown. Tombstone was too quiet and conservative for him. . . .

His knife glittered in the pale light.



Don Juan O'Toole heard the clarion call of his dead father's voice when he proclaimed himself Tejano . . . So, when the Yank soldiers laughed in his face and called him Mex, he knew he must write the truth for them in his own life's blood!

HELP FOR SAM HOUSTON

By John G. Pearsol

HE WAS a little fellow, this Don Juan O'Toole, with swarthy skin and black hair. He was slim and supple and had the grace of his Latin mother in his movement, the boldness of his Irish father in the level glance of his black eyes. He was no more than eighteen or twenty years old.

He hoped his long-eared mule, hidden securely in the brush, would make no noise. His long-bladed knife was pressing its length against his lean belly as he lay

behind the greasewood clump, watching with bright-eyed interest the long line of soldiers file past him.

They were Mexican soldiers. They were, young Juan knew, Santa Anna's soldiers, their uniforms brilliant with color, their lances bright and shining. They cast their brilliance into his eyes even on this day when the sun did not shine and the cold drizzling rain came down to drench and chill Don Juan as he lay there watching.

It was a sight that should have stirred

the heart to high patriotism for any one of Mexican blood to see. But neither pride nor high patriotism stirred Juan O'Toole. There was smouldering anger in his eyes; contempt in the slight twist of his lips.

As the column of soldiers moved on and faded from his eyes, Don Juan O'Toole rose and pulled his ragged, rain-soaked jacket about him. He shivered and plodded through the mud to where his mule waited patiently behind the greasewood. The rain, collecting in the saucer-like brim of his high-cone hat, splashed down his back, and he cursed as he climbed on the mule and rode slowly through the hills, his dangling legs nearly touching the ground.

At a pole shack he dismounted, pushed open the door and stepped inside, surveying the two occupants with his flashing eyes.

Not moving, he announced in Spanish, "It is true, this talk we have heard of a war. I have just seen the soldiers of Mexico coming up from the south. There were many of them. Some were astride horses. Some marched afoot. There were some of the big guns they call cannon. There were men with lances and swords and rifles."

The girl in the shack, Margarita Gonzalez, pretty, black-eyed and young, looked at Don Juan. She said, "It must have been an impressive sight."

José Gonzalez, her brother, also about Don Juan's age, nodded, saying, "Sí. A cannon I have never seen."

Smiling, Don Juan said, "A cannon you now shall see. For now that we know for a certainty there is a war, you and I shall go to fight. We shall fight on the side of the Tejanos."

Margarita loosed a tortilla she had held in her hands, permitting it to drop unheeded into the pan. José Gonzalez's mouth dropped open and he stared at Juan in amazement. Shaking his head, he declared emphatically, "You are completely crazy, Juan. Me, I want no war, especially I do not want to fight on the side of the Tejanos!"

Laughing, to show José his complete disregard for what he would do, Don Juan said, "Very well. I shall fight for the Tejanos, for I am one of them. At least my father was one of them. From now on you are my enemy. I shall not marry

your sister, to give her the great name of O'Toole. What do you think. . . ."

The door, slapping open, stopped Juan's words. In the doorway was framed the figure of a gaudily dressed officer of the Mexican army. Behind him stood two soldiers. The officer's sword clanked as he strode into the room, his black eyes resting accusingly on Don Juan O'Toole.

The brilliant points of the soldiers' lances glittered as the troopers came in behind the officer, lowering their lances to point at Juan.

"You speak too loudly," accused the officer, his eyes still on Don Juan. "A dog of mixed blood should not bark, lest a wolf should hear it!"

"He spoke only in jest," quickly interposed Margarita, her voice shaking. "He is loyal to the great Santa Anna. He would spit on the Tejano dogs, even as you yourself would do."

"Sí," parroted José. "That is true. He would spit upon them!"

Don Juan O'Toole felt the impact of their eyes upon him. Strangely, he knew that he had but to laugh, to cringe a little, to speak in glowing terms of this Santa Anna and he would be believed. But strangest of all things, he knew he would not to that.

In the fleeting instant in which he stood there, the center of all eyes, he remembered the poor peons who had been whipped by their rich masters, the children who starved so that their wealthy landlords might grow more fat. He knew that this war was fundamentally not a war of one race against another, but a war of conflicting ideas, so that men could be free.

"My father," Don Juan said very soberly, "was a great man. He also was a very wise man. He once said to me, 'One O'Toole is worth a dozen ordinary men.' And you who are before me are not even ordinary men, because you permit yourselves to be led by the nose by a man who robs your own people of even the food they grow in their own fields!"

Don Juan's hand moved swiftly. His knife glittered in the pale light as it swept up and across the room to rip into the shoulder of the officer. The officer staggered back, his face suddenly gray and twisted.

Don Juan leaped forward, a hand reach-

ing out to deflect a lance that swished toward him. He went past it and wrenched the shaft from the soldier's hand. He gave a glad cry and whirled, the lance driving toward the now helpless soldier. But abruptly, a myriad of stars exploded in front of his eyes.

He felt the lance waver in its flight as it left his hand. He was conscious of a great pain in his head, of Margarita's scream. Then he was conscious of nothing. . . .

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THE lance that slashed Don Juan's head was thrown with such force that it clattered across the room. The other soldier, dispossessed of his lance, leaped to his feet and retrieved his weapon, menacing José and the girl with it.

The officer leaned back against the pole wall of the shack and stared with hate-filled eyes at Don Juan's recumbent form.

The girl, Margarita, taking a white cloth from a table, moved toward the officer and touched the knife which was still embedded in his shoulder.

She said, "When I take it out I shall put on the cloth to stop the bleeding."

The officer's eyes touched her own, but he said nothing. She gave the knife a yank and ripped open the officer's tunic and pressed the white cloth against the wound.

The officer said, while she bound up the shoulder, "This open-mouthed one who stands there and gapes at us, who is he?"

"My brother," answered Margarita, smiling coquettishly.

"You and your brother shall go with us," said the officer. "Perhaps he can show us which way our soldiers traveled who passed this point."

Margarita nodded and smiled again. The officer made a commanding motion with his left hand. The soldiers pushed José toward the door. Margarita took the officer's arm and smiled up into his eyes, showing him her white teeth and red curved lips.

Outside, the horses stomped and snorted as they mounted, the girl up behind the officer, José climbing on Don Juan's mule. Then it was quiet as they

rode away, the hoof-beats echoing back.

Don Juan O'Toole opened his eyes and sat up, giving evidence by his quick actions that he had not even been unconscious. He muttered to himself while he rose, scooped up the knife that had been thrown on the floor by Margarita when she took it from the officer's shoulder. He started to wipe the blood on his tight-legged pantaloons, but instead he smiled and placed the stained blade carefully in his sash.

"A memento," he muttered, "a reminder of the unfaithfulness of women. Something to remind me that I should never think of her again. She smiled at him! She *wanted* to go with him!"

A trickling red rivulet ran from Juan's forehead down into one eye and he rubbed it away and fastened a rag about his head. Retrieving his hat from the floor, he pulled it tight down over the rag to hold it in place and stepped outside.

Through the drizzling rain he trudged northward, facing the cold wind that cut through his wet clothes like a knife. Despite his resolve not to think of Margarita, his mind dwelt upon her, reviving the sight of her smiling at the dashing young officer; showing him a light in her eyes that Don Juan O'Toole had believed was only for himself.

To take his mind from that poignant thought he revived the tales he had heard of the war, recalling the valor of those who stayed in the Alamo with the Señor Davy Crockett.

There were men—heroes! Men such as Don Juan O'Toole's father would have been had he not been killed by bandidos when Juan was a mere infant. And Fanin, who had fought at Goliad just a few days ago—he was a hero also, even though he had been defeated. It was not always the victor who was great. Even defeat brought greatness to men if they faced it bravely. A thought worth remembering, decided Don Juan.

The days were cold and wet and the nights were colder. As he trudged along Don Juan found many evidences of war in the deserted cabins along his route. In some he found shelter. In one he found food, a sack of ground meal, which he carried tied to his sash.

On the sixth night Juan saw the camp

fires of the Mexican soldiers. He circled their camp trying to see if Margarita was there with the officer. But he could not locate her. Neither could he locate the mule upon which he had seen José ride away.

For a long time Juan lay in the wet brush watching, listening, and he heard the talk of men he assumed to be officers, telling of a plan that Santa Anna had to whip a Tejano general called Sam Houston. This detachment was enroute to join Santa Anna's main army which would attack Houston.

Don Juan rose and hurried on. This was news the Tejanos would like to hear, the plan of Santa Anna's. Juan rested little, slept little now. He was gaunt and hollow-eyed when he glimpsed, through the darkness ahead of him another campfire, and the sight of it set up a fluid hammering of his pulse. Here was where he could serve the country of his father, to prove himself great, like Crockett, like Fannin, even perhaps comparable to Sam Houston!

Like a snake, he crawled close to the flickering blaze. Then he rose. He spat in contempt and strode forward, showing himself to the two who crouched beside the fire. The flickering light played on their faces when they whirled, revealing them as José and Margarita.

The girl's eyes fastened to the bag tied to Don Juan's belt as she said, "Juan!" in a voice that reminded Juan of the days before she had smiled at a Mexican officer.

"'Tis well you found us," José volunteered. "We are hungry. We are very tired. Have you food?"

Don Juan stared at their thin faces. He asked coldly, "Why should I give you food? You are my enemies. You are Mexican and I am Tejano. You would fight against me." Then to the girl, "And you are an unfaithful woman. It is well that I never married you. Had I done so, you would have run away with the first Mexican officer who chanced along."

Apathetically, they stared at him. The girl's eyes studied his. She smiled a little.

"But," Juan conceded grandly, and lying like a gentleman, "since I have filled my belly with meal I have plenty to spare. Were my stomach not full I should let you starve. That I have had enough is the

only reason I give you this meager bit."

He tossed them the sack, then turned and moved away into the darkness so that they could not see him tighten his sash, and thought to himself that a man was a fool to hunger so a trifling woman might eat. Yes, a man was doubly a fool who thought the love of a woman would take the place of meal in a man's belly.

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WHILE they ate they were silent, Juan O'Toole stared off into the darkness, his back toward them. When they had finished and he heard them toss the sack away, he turned.

He said to them, putting condescension in his voice, "Now, I suppose I shall have to take you both with me where ever I go. If I leave you here you would probably starve."

"Si, Juan," replied the girl, "It would be well if we could go with you."

Because he had walked all day and had saved his ground cornmeal for this night, Don Juan was hungry. To make himself forget the growling in his belly he thought of the messages he was carrying to Sam Houston. He said gruffly, "Very well. But if you travel with me, you must rise and go now. I carry important news to a great Tejano General. I carry a message to Sam Houston!"

José rose slowly after the girl had risen. He growled, "And who is Sam Houston?"

"Who is Sam Houston?" inquired Juan with great sarcasm. "Who is Santa Anna? And what is the sun and the moon and the stars? Oh, ignorant one, Sam Houston is the greatest of all great men. He is the savior of all Tejanos!"

Wordlessly, they followed him as he trudged along, lithe, muscular, seemingly tireless. Because of the girl's growing weariness he had to stop often and permit her to rest.

As dawn approached, they sighted a cabin. No smoke came from its rock chimney. It appeared deserted, but caution was in Juan O'Toole and he held out a restraining hand.

"I shall approach it alone," he told them. "I am the one who is armed. If it is a friend of the Tejanos, all will be well.

If it is an enemy, I shall murder him!"

Noiselessly, he approached the door and tapped upon it. The silence undisturbed, he pushed the door open. The place was in great disorder. Pots and pans lay about; a few articles of clothing were on the floor. There was evidence of the place having been deserted in a hurry. By the texture of a flapjack in a pan near the stove he knew the occupants to have been Texan rather than Mexican.

He searched for more food, found none, then picked up the flapjack from the pan. About to bite it, he looked out the door. The girl was lying down, José beside her, utter exhaustion in their lax sprawl on the ground.

Don Juan smiled, thinking fleetingly of his father saying one O'Toole was worth a dozen ordinary men. He went outside and extended the flapjack to the girl. He said, "There were two of them. I have eaten one. You may divide this with José."

He started away, striking north again. Behind him José grumbled, saying between bites, "He eats a whole one and gives us one to divide between the two of us. He is a pig!"

"I am the leader," argued Don Juan. "I must be strong to show you the way when you falter."

The girl saw Don Juan tighten his sash as he marched along ahead. A man who had just eaten a flapjack would not tighten his belt. She smiled and her eyes held a light that was very soft and which would have gladdened Don Juan O'Toole had he seen it. She said to José, her voice soft, "These Tejanos must be great men, José."

José grunted. Don Juan whipped his head about and looked for an instant at the girl. But by then there were tired lines in her face again, and the smile was gone from her lips.

Juan said, "That you have not already known that is all that puzzles me."

All through the day they marched ahead, and at night they rested only a short time. They were nearing a settlement, Juan knew, by the increased number of cabins he glimpsed scattered in the distance. They were black, square blotches on the sky-line, with no lights, no fires. Their occupants had gone, either to escape

from the approaching Mexican army or to join Sam Houston.

For that reason Juan did not stray from his path. Soon he glimpsed the settlement. A fire flickered on its outskirts. About it men were gathered. As he drew near he could see that they were armed Texans.

Don Juan hurried, stopping just outside the circle of firelight thrown by the camp fire.

He said, in his best English, "Friends—amigos! I am Don Juan O'Toole—a Tejano. I come with a message for Sam Houston."

The men about the fire leaped to their feet, rifles, pistols appearing miraculously in their hands. Don Juan, followed by Margarita and José, strode forward.

"A Mex," a soldier said, both contempt and hatred in his voice.

"A Tejano," Don Juan corrected, drawing himself up proudly.

They grinned, their guns still pointed at the bedraggled trio. One asked, "What's this about Sam Houston?"

Don Juan said, his English bad, "I have come far. I have listen to some Mex soldiers of Santa Anna who are behind me. They say they go to join Santa Anna who is to attack Sam Houston. If you could attack theese soldiers and make them talk more, you would have what you call—the—the jump on Santa Anna, no?"

They still stared at him. None of them were in uniform. Some were in buckskin, some in homespun. Their eyes were hard, distrustful.

One, long-haired and buckskin-clad, made a placating gesture with his left hand. He said, "You're a Texan?" without smiling.

Juan answered eagerly, "Si. I am a Tejano!"

"Where are these Mex soldiers and how many are there?"

"Behind me," Juan told him, "Mebby they are wan hondred, mebbly two hondred."

"Now that's fine," said the long-haired frontiersman, sarcasm coming to his voice, "An' you expect us to believe it, I reckon?"

Frowning, Juan nodded, saying, "Si. You should believe it."

They all laughed. The long-haired one spat and ordered, "Lock 'em up. Put 'em

in that 'dobe." He motioned to a building behind him.

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JUAN said nothing as strong hands grasped him. He sank down on the dirt floor of the 'dobe, Margarita and José beside him, and stared miserably out at the fire, at the circle of men near it.

"You, Juan," said José definitely, "are a fool. You have gotten us into a pretty fix."

Juan said nothing. He was very tired, very hungry, very sleepy, and very much discouraged. He could hear the hum of the Texan's voices outside, but could not distinguish the words. Had he been able

What if the Mexican soldiers were closer than Juan thought and should attack the town soon, perhaps at dawn, when these Texans were asleep? They would be killed. Sam Houston would not get the reinforcement of these men. Santa Anna would get his reinforcements!

Silent as a panther, Don Juan slipped outside the door, the incessant hammering of his pulse in his ears. At the door of a shack he paused, listened to the deep breathing of its occupants, the sound bringing depression to him. It was as he had thought!

As he started to turn he caught the glint of light on rifle barrels stacked inside the door. Holding his breath, he reached in, gently withdrawing a rifle from the

Your boy may be in the Southwest Pacific—in North Africa, the Aleutians, or Iceland. Where ever he is, you'll want him to have the guns, the planes, and the bullets he needs to overcome a ruthless enemy. The best way to give him those things is to lend your money to your Government—BUY A WAR BOND EVERY PAY-DAY!

to hear what they were saying he would have heard the long-haired frontiersman speaking: "It's a trick. Mebby there are some soldiers out there. I reckon there are. But they won't be where this greaser says they are. What they're aiming to do is pull us out of here and trap us and keep us from getting to Sam Houston. So we play their own game. Let these three know we're wise to their trick, then let 'em get away. They'll head back to their soldier pals. We'll foller 'em and surprise th' Mex's. How's that?"

One of the men laughed. In the 'dobe shack, Don Juan heard it. But that was all he heard. He kept watching the fire and the men. Soon the fire died. It was dark. Only one man was there. The place seemed deserted.

The one man who had apparently been left on guard now lay down and drew a blanket over him. Don Juan heard him snore, and, his own drowsiness leaving him, rose and went softly to the door. Peering out, he could see no sign of the men who had been there. They were probably in the houses of the town, asleep.

stack, its feel in his hand bringing him comfort, a feeling of power. For a second he stood there, hesitant, then reached in and got another.

With the two guns he retraced his steps, watching as he rounded the 'dobe corner to see the recumbent form of the lone sentinel.

The sentinel was in a different position now. He had drawn his rifle up over his body, held it in his hands. But he still breathed deeply, appeared asleep. Juan hissed sibilantly at the door of the 'dobe.

José and the girl appeared. He motioned to them. They followed him into the darkness, and he led them back the way they had come.

Well away from town he stopped, handed José a rifle. "For you," he said, "a new gun. One at which you will marvel. One that shoots six times without reloading. I have heard of them, but until now I have not seen one."

José frowned, asking, "What use have I for it, this new gun?"

"You will fight with it," declared Juan. "You will fight the Mexican soldiers who

"will shortly be on their way here. . . ."

"I will not," denied José emphatically. "For why should I?"

"You will, or I shall, myself, kill you," said Juan. "And you should because it is the right thing to do, because I am going to do it. My father, so they told me, did this same thing with bandits who were in our country. He, himself, died, but his name lived on. That will be our privilege. We shall die, perhaps, but our names will live on. To be—who can tell—as famous as the one they call George Washington, or perhaps even as celebrated as my father."

"And what of me?" spoke up Margarita.

"You," explained Juan, "shall stay behind and grieve for us, as a woman should. In the end, if I die, you shall no doubt marry some mustachioed Mexican officer, like the one on which you smiled. But even so, you shall always know that I, Juan O'Toole, was the best man upon which your eyes have ever rested."

For what seemed a long time the girl stared at him. That peculiarly soft smile was on her lips. Don Juan saw it now and it served to lessen a little the iron resolve in him. But not enough to swerve him from his purpose.

He said, "Near here, if you had noticed, there is a narrow passageway through the hills down which the soldiers must come. There we will stay and fight them. Even though we cannot hope to win, we will kill many of them. We shall fight hard enough and long enough so that they cannot surprise the men back there at the town who would go to help Sam Houston. They shall know that we did not lie and shall hurry to tell Sam Houston of what we told them. Our mission will be accomplished, even though we do not do it in person."

José argued, "You are a fool. I repeat, you are crazy—"

"I repeat," snapped Juan impatiently, "that I shall kill you if you do not do as I say!"

José shrugged, and Juan looked for a moment at the girl. He said, "Adios. Even though you would perhaps have been unfaithful, I should have liked to have had you for my wife."

The girl said nothing. Juan motioned

José forward. He left the girl standing there and hurried along, thinking of how slowly the soldiers must move because they had to drag heavy cannon behind them, through the deep mud.

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BEFORE long they came to the narrow gorge, and here Juan stopped. He took the rifle from José's hands and experimented with its action, seeing how the hammer came back and revolved the cylinder.

"Six times it shoots," he explained, "and each time you must do thus."

Moodily, José nodded. He took the gun. He said, "I wonder how it shall feel to die?"

Juan queried, "Do you remember when you were born?"

"No," admitted José.

"Neither shall you remember when you die," ventured Juan. "Life, and death, they are the same. If you cannot remember something, it is the same as though it had not occurred. So when you are dead you will feel no worse, at least, than you do now, and possibly not so badly. Is that not a comfort?"

"No," declared José moodily.

Juan shrugged, saying, "I hear the sound of horses. The time is come to do more than talk."

He hunkered down beside a rock. José followed suit. The sound of horses' hoofs on the wet ground increased. The sky was lighted by streaks of dawn. Dim figures showed at the farther end of the narrow defile, increasing until the gorge was choked with horses and men.

Juan O'Toole and José were silent, invisible behind their rocks.

José offered hopefully, "There is still time to run."

Juan spoke: "There never is time to run, for anyone, anytime, anywhere."

José started to argue, but Juan interrupted, commanding, "Shoot now! Soon you shall see that even you are worth more than many of those men who blindly follow Santa Anna!"

José raised his rifle, cocked it. Its boom scattered a thousand echoes along the rocky gorge. Juan O'Toole laughed and raised his own gun.

The soldiers stopped. The horses began to mill. There were yells, shouts. Juan could see a fancily dressed officer galloping up and down along the line.

Juan shot at him, but hit his horse and showed his white teeth in a smile as the officer tumbled into the mud. The officer reminded him of the one Margarita had smiled upon. He hoped this was that one.

The soldiers charged, yelling, their lances bright, sinister things, pointing directly at the two figures behind the rocks. Juan and José shot slowly, regularly; José because he feared to quit, Juan because he was filled with a fervent desire to serve this land of his father's.

One after another horses and men fell. Juan counted those which fell under his aim. He thought longingly, as the horsemen drew close, that if he only had another gun he could kill many more of them. Then his gun was empty.

A lance struck his side. He saw, from the fringe of his vision, José go down and roll away from a lance thrust. Even though José was not a Tejano and had fought only reluctantly against the soldiers, Juan was glad he was still alive. . . .

Suddenly the air was vibrant with new sound. It seemed as though a thousand guns exploded simultaneously. The air quivered with their thunder. The shrill whine of bullets rose above the tumult. Queerly, Don Juan O'Toole had the insane impression that these guns were not the guns of the Mexicans. Then he knew for a certainty that they were not, because it was the Mexicans who were falling from their saddles.

The shots were coming from up above the gorge. Up there, silhouetted against the sky, were the figures Juan O'Toole could identify as Tejanos by their big hats, their long-barrelled rifles. They were driving the Mexicans back.

Juan O'Toole tried to rise to better watch it, exultation in him. But something chained him to the ground. He frowned, discovered it was a wound in his side, making him so weak he could not rise.

He was dizzy, giddy. He saw a figure he imagined was Margarita. At first he was not sure. Then he was sure as she knelt beside him.

There were Texans there, too. They eyed him differently now as they stared at him. There was respect in their eyes.

The long-haired one spoke, "Mister O'Toole, I am a damn' mule-head! I apologize."

Don Juan smiled, looked at Margarita. He said, "My English, she is not so good. If one of you. . . ."

"I speak Spanish," said the long-haired man.

"Bueno," sighed Juan. "You are not a fool, because you were wise enough to follow me here. Now you can take my word to Sam Houston. All is well. I should like to go with you, to help whip this Santa Anna. But I fear I cannot. My side, it is hurt. My belly, it is empty. And I—I am very sleepy."

He closed his eyes. Margarita started to touch him, then withdrew her hand as she saw that he only slept from exhaustion. José, trying to brush the mud from his clothes stared hotly down at Juan.

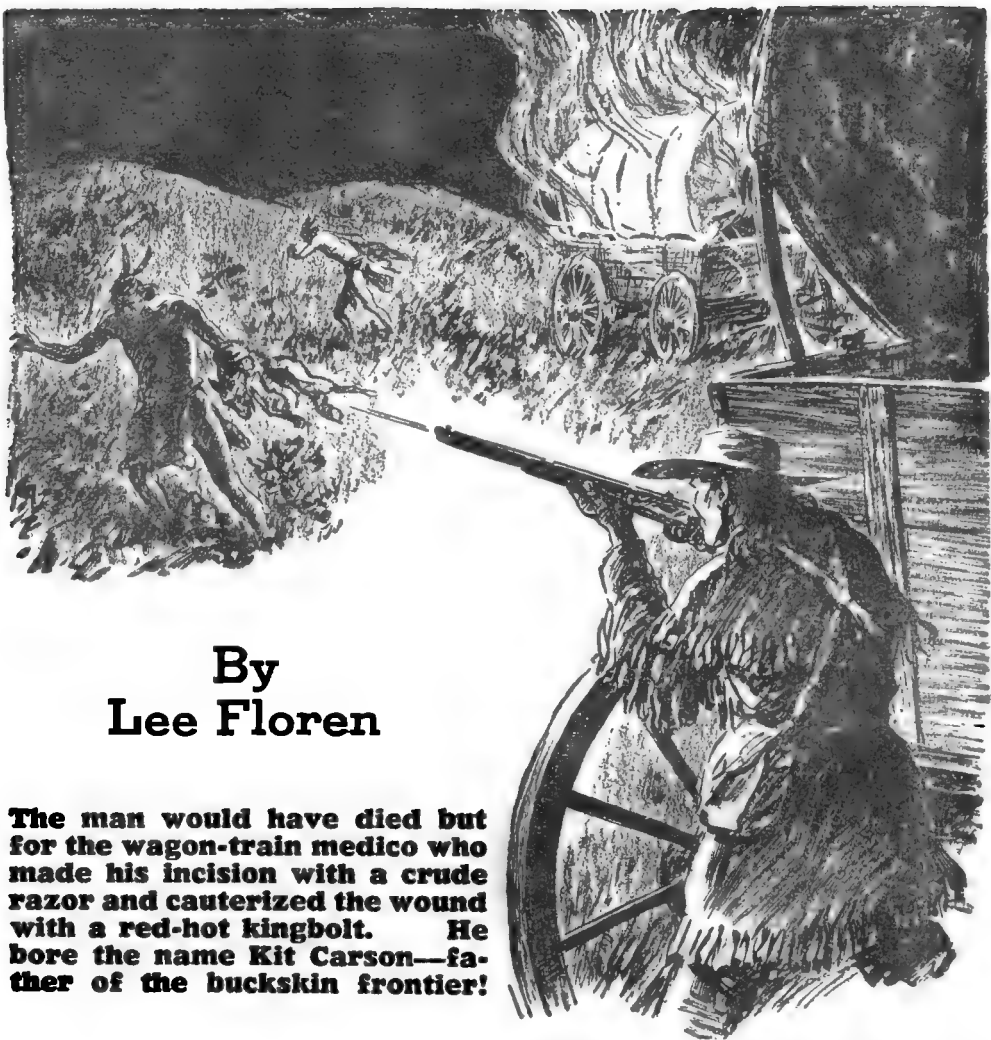
José said to Margarita, "He is a pig. He eats more than we, then says his belly is empty. He boasts of his greatness, then sleeps when we have stayed awake as long as he. Why did you not tell him that we also have fought. It was I who killed one of the soldiers who took us away. It was you who killed the Mexican officer so that we might get away from him. Why did you not tell him that you smiled at the officer only so he would not see that Juan was still alive. Why do you keep silent when he boasts of his greatness?"

"Silence!" commanded the girl. "He is not a pig. He did not eat, not even a little. He lied so that we might eat. I know this because I saw him tighten his sash, so that it might not fall from about his middle. He gave us all his meal, gave us the only cake. He is wounded and is weak from that. Were it not for him you would be running still. He is a great man, this Juan O'Toole of mine, and I do not tell him of the officer because it flatters me to see jealousy in his eyes."

"A great man!" sneered José. "As great as this one he calls George Washington, I suppose?"

"Even as great as he," agreed Margarita.

"These women," muttered José.



By
Lee Floren

The man would have died but for the wagon-train medico who made his incision with a crude razor and cauterized the wound with a red-hot kingbolt. He bore the name Kit Carson—father of the buckskin frontier!

Kit Carson shot the redskin who set the wagon aflame.

THE MAN had been shot above the arm by an Indian bullet. Now he lay on the ground beside a wagon. Pain showed on his weather-tanned face. His arm was swollen and red, and gangrene had already set in.

The rest of the wagon-train's men and women stood around and watched. "My God, we have to do somethin'," one man said.

Nobody spoke for some time. They stood in a silent, helpless group and looked

down at the wounded man.

"Where's the closest medico?" one asked.

A husky man spat tobacco juice. "Dunno jus' where the closest doc is located. But where ever he is, you can bet it's a long distance off. By the time we got him here this feller'd be dead."

"But we gotta do somethin'," the first man maintained. "If'n we don't, he'll die."

"But what can we do? 'We're not docs."

ONE OF THE MIGHTY

"That arm should be cut off," a bearded man said.

"But who'll do it?"

Now, one man spoke for the first time. "I'll do it," he said.

He was a short, slim man who wore buckskin, and his long hair hung to his shoulders. He stood over the sick man and asked, "Is that all right with you, feller?"

The sick man nodded.

"Build a fire," the slim man said. Then to the women, "This won't be nice to look at."

The women trudged back to the wagons. One man went to his pack and came back with a razor and a saw. Another man heated water over the fire. Still another got a sheet and tore it into strips.

The wounded man lay with his eyes closed. The slim fellow got a kingbolt from a wagon and put it in the fire. Finally it got hot. Then he went to work.

He cut through the man's muscles with the razor. Instantly the sharp blade was covered with blood. The wounded man screamed and fainted. The other cut through the flesh, and then sawed the bone in two. The saw was bloody, too.

"Give me the kingbolt," the slim man said.

One man, using tongs, handed him the kingbolt, which the slim man took and, holding the hot metal in the tongs, he seared the stump of the man's arm. The sickly smell of burning flesh and blood was strong. But the arm stopped bleeding.

Then the slim man bound the stump. At last he stood up and wiped his sweaty forehead with blood stained-hands.

"He should pull through," Kit Carson said.

And, true to Kit Carson's prophecy, the man did live. Afterwards, he'd show people his maimed arm and say, "Kit Carson saved my life."

Kit Carson was a small, wiry man. He spoke little and smiled easily. He was raised in Howard county, Missouri, where he was born in 1809, and left home at seventeen to become a buffalo hunter.

He roamed the prairies and foothills and the mountains, following the shaggy beasts that were being so ruthlessly slaughtered for their hides. Here, too, he

met the various Indian tribes—the Sioux, the Cheyennes, the Kiowas, the Comanches—and he came to know them.

As a rule, the Indians liked Kit Carson. He was interested in children, and he used to play with the Indian boys. The bucks liked this show of interest, and usually they struck up a friendship with Kit.

He hunted buffalo for the cavalry forts. He was buffalo hunter at Bent's Fort for eight years. But the buffalo were being exterminated by the hunters and their Sharps rifles. And, with the killing off of all the buffalo, the Indians rose up in armed conflict against the Whites. For the buffalo was the center of their existence—the buffalo fed them by his flesh and clothed and protected them by his hides. And now, the buffalo was becoming extinct.

At first, Kit Carson mediated disputes between the soldiers and the Indians. He knew too well that men would be needlessly killed if the soldiers were allowed to clash with the Indians. But this, too, became futile and open warfare loomed ahead.

The Utes, the Kiowas and the Comanches started robbing and looting wagon-trains rolling to the new territories of Arizona and New Mexico. They attacked both civilian and government wagon-trains until it got so bad that the forts in New Mexico had to exist on the meager food they could raise inside their garrisons.

At this time Kit Carson was guiding wagon-trains along the old Santa Fe trail. This was tame work for him—a man of action, daring, and turbulent adventures. He saw that in order to settle the West the Indians would have to be segregated, their constant danger to every community destroyed once and for all.

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PRESIDENT Polk, hearing of Carson's ability, accordingly made him a second lieutenant in the United States Army. And so, Kit Carson's long war against the Indians began. In 1865, Carson headed three companies that were ordered to stop the savage attacks of the Cheyennes, the Comanches, and the Kiowas.

In his forces, Carson had three hundred and ninety enlisted men, fourteen commissioned officers, and seventy-five friendly Indians.

He trailed the Kiowa war party and finally caught up with it on the Canadian river. The Kiowas had established a village there. A deadly battle lasted from eight in the morning until midnight, when the Kiowas retreated, severely whipped. Sixty Kiowas were left dead in the village. But Carson's men also lost a number of their comrades. Two privates and one 'non-com' were killed. Thirteen privates, four of them Indians, were wounded, some seriously.

Kit Carson was in a number of other Indian battles, including the one called the Point of Rocks. But luck and cool courage were with him and he came out of them all on his feet, though he was wounded any number of times. He also fought in California with General Fremont, but he liked the plains and mountains better than the sunshine and oranges, so he came back to the foothills and the snow-tipped Rockies.

Many tales are told of his bravery. He was courageous but never reckless. One time, in New Mexico, the Indians had kidnapped some women and children from local ranches, and Kit Carson led the cowpokes in the pursuit. Finally, they overtook the red skins, holing up on a hill, who opened fire on the small party of whites.

Creeping through the brush, hiding behind rocks, they advanced, firing as they came forward. The Indians answered the fire for a time, but when a few of them had been killed, they hastily withdrew. As Carson had feared, however, they had murdered the captured women and children.

Only once, according to Kit Carson, was he fooled by the Indians. This was while he was riding point on a group of wagons going over the Santa Fe trail. They drew in a circle when night came, along the bottom of a creek, and prepared to settle down until dawn.

During the day's trek, Carson had seen signs pointing to the red men's presence, and he was openly suspicious and alert, fearing an attack. Toward dusk,

he saw two coyotes on a ridge close to camp. When the dogs ran out and barked at them, the coyotes turned and snapped. Kit Carson was so close that he heard one coyote's teeth click together as he struck at an overly inquisitive canine.

Carson did not shoot at the coyotes. Ammunition was worth more than gold at such a crucial point. Also, if he shot, the Indians were sure to hear the gun's report, and from it determine the location of the wagon train.

Later, however, he was sorry he hadn't shot the coyotes. At midnight a wagon suddenly caught on fire, and Kit Carson shot the redskin who had set it aflame. The Indian was carrying a coyote pelt.

Another Indian, also carrying a fresh coyote pelt, was also found and captured. Speaking in his tongue, he told Kit Carson how they had outwitted him earlier in the evening.

For the two coyotes Kit Carson had seen were not coyotes—they were the two bucks on their hands and knees with the hides draped over them!

"But I heard one of you snap at the dogs," he said.

The Indian explained that his friend, the dead redskin, had made this snapping noise under his coyote disguise by rattling some buffalo teeth. Kit Carson laughed and said: "I was sure buffaloed on that one."

In 1886, the venerable Carson was living on a ranch just outside of Lyons, Colorado. One day he was mounting his horse, and in so doing, ruptured a blood vessel in his neck. It proved to be fatal...

He was buried at Fort Lyons, but the people of the Territory of New Mexico asked that he be buried in New Mexico soil, an honor to them all. Accordingly his body was exhumed and shipped to Taos, New Mexico, where a monument proudly rises above his grave to this day.

It seems ironical that a man who had been exposed to so much hectic danger should die from a ruptured blood vessel incurred while mounting a tame horse, but such is the way of fate. With the death of Kit Carson, the West lost one of its most representative citizens—the very epitome of his time, and a courageous example for all times.

TALLTIMBER BURNS FAST

By C.D. Freeland and W.D. Overholser

Pat met the charge with a stiff
right to the jaw.



How could Fire Warden Pat Stevens save a wilderness syndicate's empire of Douglas firs from a crimson hell, when hatred rankled in the loggers he had sworn to protect—and his lone friend was an arsonist in the pay of the enemy camp?

FROM the moment Pat Stevens took his seat in the speeder, he knew that District Fire Warden Clayborne had been right when he said Pat would run into trouble as fire warden at the Maxlin Logging Company. For the last ten minutes the half dozen hickory-

shirted loggers had been eyeing him speculatively. Then they'd dart expectant glances toward a raw-boned giant who sat glowering at Pat as if a fire warden were about as welcome around Maxlin's as a temperance speaker.

All this Pat saw, and he saw, too, that he was into a pot of trouble up to his neck. He'd have to convince the big man if he were going to do his job, but the hard glint in the fellow's stone gray eyes, the granite set of his bulldog jaw told Pat that this was just about the toughest proposition he'd ever tackled.

Pat let his eyes circle the speeder, sizing up each man, and mentally tabulating what he saw. They were good men in their way, but tough, and like their giant leader, hated fire wardens and all their new fangled ideas. Pat's eyes completed the circle and came to rest of the little leathery-faced logger alongside him. The little man was toying suggestively with a large bone-handled knife. He'd open the blade by running his thumb along the edge, half close it, then push it open again with a calloused thumb. The knife and thumb trick could be a warning, or just a habit. Pat had a hunch it wasn't a habit.

As Pat turned his eyes back to the big logger, the man, with studied carelessness took his cigarette from his mouth and looked around at the others as if to call their attention to what he was about to do. Then he deliberately flipped the butt over the side of the racing speeder.

Probably the cigarette wouldn't start a fire, but the big man's act could have only one meaning. He aimed to find out if Pat were going to do his job as fire warden, or let things slide as his predecessor had done. It was a challenge, and Pat accepted it.

"That's against the rules." Pat said it softly, but in a tone that carried to all the tensely waiting loggers. "You know better."

"So what?" the giant sneered.

"So don't do it again. Let's say you just forgot this time."

"The hell with you!" the logger snapped. "No panty-waist fire warden is going to tell me where to throw my smokes. Remember that, Mister Warden. Hey, Pete, stop this damned thing!"

The speeder groaned to a stop beside

a spar tree, and Pat let the matter drop. There was no use forcing the issue yet. There'd be plenty of time, later.

The loggers jumped off, all except the driver and the little man with the knife. As the speeder again started on its jouncing trip, the little man nudged Pat.

"You know who you tangled with?" the little gent said.

"Can't say I do. What's more, I don't give a damn."

The older man showed a row of snoose-stained teeth in a homely grin.

"That, my friend, was Mule Hogan, the Bull of the Woods. Just off hand, mister, I'd say you picked the wrong man to get tough with."

"Now, maybe I did," Pat shrugged. "I seem to have a way of picking a ruckus with the wrong men."

The little gent's grin widened as he stuck the knife back into his pocket. Pat had the feeling that the covert threat with the knife had been more for the benefit of Mule Hogan and the other loggers than for him. Obviously the man was trying to be friendly.

"I'm Pinson, Jake Pinson," said the little gent. "Bull buck around here. Maybe I can do you some good. Being fire warden at Maxlin's ain't no daisy-picking job. You can put that in your pipe and smoke it right off. It ain't any of my business, but was I you, I'd just stick around and draw my pay."

"That'd be one way to play it," Pat conceded. "But it doesn't happen to be my way."

"You know, son," Pinson said slowly, "I kinda had you figured that way. Just the same, I'm advising you not to tangle with Hogan. He's hell on wheels in a fight, Mule is."

Pat felt like telling nosey Jake Pinson to keep his advice to himself, but he didn't say it. He'd made enough enemies in one day, and a gabby gent like Pinson might tell him some of the things he needed to know.

Pat looked back down the grade behind the speeder to where the tracks disappeared into the tall Douglas firs. "Why is this camp so dead set against fire wardens?" he asked carelessly.

"That's easy," Pinson answered. "If you wardens don't leave us alone this

summer, this outfit'll go broke sure as God put cones on a fir tree. Then the Craig interests will move in and take over."

"I don't get it." Pat turned his head and looked at Pinson sharply. "What do you mean—if we don't leave you alone?"

"Well," Pinson said slowly, "it's like this. Craig holds a mortgage on the whole Maxlin camp. If Maxlin can't meet his payments in the fall, Craig will take over. We got some pretty good contracts and a mighty sweet logging show here, but if you fellows close us down every few days on account of bad fire weather, them contracts ain't gonna be worth a damn to Maxlin. You get it, son?"

Pat nodded. "I get it, all right. It'll also get every logger on the Maxlin payroll in my hair if I do my job like it's going to be done."

"It sure will, son," Pinson agreed. "Another thing: Maxlin's fire equipment is in bad shape. And he can't afford to lay out cash for new stuff just now."

Something about the way Pinson said that wasn't just right. Pat had the feeling the bull buck was pointing out his course of action for him, and at the same time trying to find out whether he was going to be tough, but Pat Stevens wasn't a man to be trapped into committing himself until the time came. He merely said, "It's my job to keep a fire out of the woods," and let it go at that.

They lapsed into silence then, and Pat had time to think. Pinson's information had cleared up a lot of things. It had seemed queer that Pat had been pulled out of a logging camp in Washington and brought down to Oregon. Pat understood it now.

Craig wanted somebody who was not known in the Oregon woods; somebody who could be depended upon to enforce the Oregon fire laws and push Maxlin into bankruptcy. Then, too, he wouldn't want Maxlin burned out if he aimed to take over in the fall.

Clayborne was all right. Pat was sure of that. The District Fire Warden's only interest in the deal was to get a good man on the job. Pat took a mental oath right then that he'd be a good man. He'd hew to the line he knew was right, and let the chips fall where they would.

PAT'S first week in camp was hectic. Every minute of his time was taken up checking the fire equipment, inspecting the spark arrestors on the steam donkeys and locies, seeing that the men were not smoking in the woods and doing the hundred and one little things his job called for.

As July merged into August the weather became warmer. The relative humidity dropped steadily and an east wind sprang up. It was bad fire weather. For days the moisture content of the air stayed around thirty-eight per cent. If it dropped another three per cent, the fire hazard would be bad enough to close camp a part of each day.

This was the weather wardens feared. A spark could turn the camp into an inferno. Any of a number of things might do it. A spark sifting through the worn-out spark arrestors on the donkeys, the friction of a cable rubbing against a stump or log, sun shining through a broken piece of glass, or the greatest hazard of all—carelessness on the part of the loggers.

For weeks Mule Hogan had stalled Pat off on testing the fire hose. Hogan tolerated Pat as he might any pest; tolerated, and that was all! No fighting words had been uttered yet, but the enmity was there. Like the tinder dry woods, it needed only a spark to set things off.

Before August was a week old, Pat knew he couldn't wait any longer. The hose was important. With out it the trestles and logging equipment would be hard to save if a fire started.

It was early Friday morning of the first week in August that Pat strode into Hogan's office, his lips set in a hard, thin line.

Mule Hogan was seated behind his table sorting over time sheets. He looked up and frowned. "Well?" he snapped. His manner as much as said he was too busy to be bothered by an insignificant warden.

Pat pulled up a chair, sat down and swung a leg over a corner of the table.

"When are you aiming to test that fire hose?" he asked.

Hogan shifted the time sheets around, and without looking up at Pat, said, "I'll get around to it one of these days, but not till I get damned good and ready."

"That's just dandy," Pat said. "In fact,

it's perfect, providing you get around to it this morning."

"The hell!" Hogan spread his wide palms on the table top and came slowly to his feet. "I'm running this camp, sonny," he growled. "I'll make that test when I want to, and no sooner. Now get to hell out of here before I lose my temper."

"You're refusing to make that test this morning?"

"You're damned right I am!"

Anger ran its hot path through Pat Stevens' lean body. He'd run up against some stubborn men in his time, but nobody in a class with this Hogan.

Pat took a notebook out of his pocket, and as he filled out a form, he said, "You're a little on the bull-headed side, my friend. Now I know why you drink your coffee out of your saucer. You're so short-sighted you probably couldn't hit your mouth with a cup."

"So I'm bull-headed, am I?" Hogan roared, and shook a ham-like fist under Pat's nose. "I drink my coffee—" His words came to a gurgling stop as Pat slipped a sheet of paper into his hand. "What's this?"

"A citation to appear in court tomorrow morning for failure to take proper fire precautions. You've played stubborn long enough, Hogan. If you want to get tough, you'll find that I can get a little tougher. See you in court." He strode out and slammed the door on Hogan's stream of lurid curses.

Saturday morning Pat recommended to Judge Van Teel that Hogan be fined fifty dollars, fine to be suspended on condition that the hose test be made immediately. It was a roundabout way of getting action, but something had to be done, and it was the sort of thing Hogan would respect.

The test that afternoon proved what Pat had suspected. Most of the fifty-foot lengths had to be replaced. The new hose would be forthcoming, but that didn't help if an emergency came up soon.

Sunday was hot and dry with the wind still in the east. Pat felt a grim foreboding. He remembered what Jake Pinson had told him his first day in camp. If Craig meant to play dirty, and had a man planted in camp, this was the time to make trouble for Maxlin. With this kind of weather, it wouldn't take much to fix it

so that Maxlin never could pay off his mortgage.

Ten o'clock Monday morning Pat got out his sling psychrometer to test the moisture condition of the air. As he was making the test, Mule Hogan walked up behind him.

"Well, boy scout," he sneered, "what does it say? Or are you just playing with toys?"

Hogan had done a lot of bragging the day before within Pat's hearing as to how he'd got off easy in court. Now Pat saw Hogan's arrogant frame of mind, and knew he was in for the riding of his life. Pat studied the instrument for a few seconds before he answered. Then he laid it down and turned to the woods boss.

"I'm sorry, Hogan," he said evenly, "but this toy says the humidity is down to twenty-nine. You know what that means. You'll have to shut down pronto. Call in your loggers before something happens that neither of us want."

"Call in—" Hogan almost exploded. Then: "Say, you two-bit, long-gear'd son of a nursery smoke chaser, I'm not calling the boys in for nobody. It's time somebody around here was showing you where you get off, and I reckon I'm just the jay-hoo to do it."

Hogan clenched his fists and started forward. This was it. From the moment he'd had his run-in with Hogan on the speeder, Pat had known this fight was bound to come. In a way he was glad. Mule Hogan was the sort of a gent who could understand a right to the jaw a lot better than he could a dictionary.

"Come on, you big ape!" Pat challenged. "You've been asking for it. I can dish it out if you can take it."

For just a second Hogan paused, a spark of admiration in his bright little eyes. Courage was the one thing the Bull of the Woods respected, and there was nothing else on Pat Steven's lean face. Most men backed up when Hogan cocked a fist, but there was no backing up to the stringy fire warden who stood before him. For that one second a grin lighted Hogan's big face at the prospect of a good fight, and then was gone.

"You won't be dishing it out very long, sonny!" Hogan roared. Then he rushed, head lowered and ham-like fists flaying.

PAT met the charge with a stiff right to the jaw. It staggered Hogan but didn't stop him. Clublike blows smashed Pat's body. Great arms flung themselves about him. This was Hogan's type of fighting, but it wasn't Pat's. He gave a mighty surge with his shoulders, and jolted Hogan on the jaw with the heel of his hand. As the logger fell back, Pat's right slashed out to his chin again.

Behind him, Pat heard the gathered loggers cheering their champion on. Hogan was fighting their fight against an upstart fire warden, and there wasn't a man in the circle who wouldn't have bet his last dollar on the boss winning.

Hogan rushed again, and Pat was sent staggering into the ring of men. They pushed him unceremoniously back toward the Bull of the Woods. Pat barely ducked a tremendous blow that would have knocked him cold if it had landed, and got in a stinging right to Hogan's jaw.

It was that way for a time. Rapier against bludgeon. Speed against power rushes. Duck and feint. Roll his head as Hogan's blows came through. Side-step and lash out with his lightning right.

Pat got his opening before he expected it. Hogan missed again, partly swung himself off balance, and Pat had his chance. This time his right snapped through with every ounce of his lean strength behind it. Hogan crumbled like a sawed fir against Pat. The sheer momentum of his fall sent Stevens sprawling against the bunkhouse steps. The back of his head struck a corner of a step, and a star-illuminated blackness engulfed him.

When Pat opened his eyes, it was to see Hogan staggering toward him on wobbly legs. Pat tried to move, tried to get to his feet, but his body was paralyzed. He'd seen what loggers' caulked boots did to a man. It was his turn now.

That final, crushing beating never came. There was a surge in the ring of loggers, and Jake Pinson pushed his way through.

"Fire!" Pinson yelled. "Fire! Fire on Jessup Creek!"

Pat heard, but it didn't mean anything to him. Just jumbled, incoherent mouthings. He didn't really come to until a sheet of water splashed over him, and Mule Hogan was helping him to his feet. Then the full, dread significance hit him.

Every log that left camp had to cross a trestle over Jessup Creek. If that trestle burned, the logs couldn't be shipped to the mill, and Maxlin couldn't fulfill his contract. There would be some loss of timber, but the biggest loss would be that of time, right now vital to Maxlin.

Through Pat's chaotic thoughts came the realization that Mule Hogan was helping him to his feet and saying something.

"Yes, sir, Stevens," Hogan was grumbling, "any man that can lick Mule Hogan is all right. You had me licked, by God, fair and square. Damn it, I couldn't get my hands on you. It was like batting at a fly. Then wham, something exploded on my chin and that was all I knew. I'm proud to shake the hand of the only gent who ever knocked out Mule Hogan."

The big man grinned through puffy lips, and held out a huge paw. Pat took it.

"You're all right yourself, Mule," Pat grinned back, "but I don't know why we're chewing the fat like a couple of old maids. Let's get that fire coralled."

"Yeah." Hogan grunted. "Sure." He swung around to the circle of loggers. "What are you galoots standing around here gawping like a bunch of wall-eyed ninnies for? Git moving. Jake, take three sets of fallers and get the snags down below the trestle. Mike, fetch out the axes and hoes. Clean the brush and logs out around the base of the trestle. Fendly, break out some shovels to dirt down the timbers. Bronsom, get the saws. Aley, get the speeder going."

Hogan turned back to face Pat. "Got any suggestions, Stevens?"

"Just one, Mule. Get the tank car down there with some water."

Hogan looked sour. "Hell, man, there ain't no use doing that with our fire hose all shot to pieces!"

Pat grinned, and slapped Hogan on the back. "I figured something like this might happen," he snapped, "so I prepared for it. While you were seeing the judge, Saturday, I was talking to Clayborne. I arranged for him to send a hose line up to the railroad crossing on the West Timber highway. It ought to be there now."

For a second Hogan stared blankly at Pat. Then he let out a whoop.

"Stevens, you're okay!" he bellowed, his voice hoarse.

He swung back to the men. "You, Sutton, get that tank car filled with water. Steam up the locie. Abe, take number three speeder and go after that hose. No damn fire is going to beat this camp!"

WHEN they reached the trestle, Pat stayed with Hogan a few minutes until they got the men lined out on their assigned jobs. For the moment there was little he could do until the speeder returned with the hose.

"I'm going to take a walk around the fire line," he told Hogan.

From where Pat stood beside Hogan, it appeared that once the fire was stopped at the trestle, the rest would be easy. A bulldozer trail around the fire on the sides and back should be sufficient, but this wasn't a thing a man could take chances on. He'd have to see the fire line from all sides.

Pat walked along the railroad grade a few hundred feet, then cut sharply to the right and followed down the top of a ridge. This brought him above the fire at its widest point. As he reached the brow of the hill, he paused to study the ground.

To Pat's right was the main body of the roaring inferno. He could see the loggers working frantically at the base of the trestle clearing out the brush and debris.

Pat's eyes shifted back to the fire again. An involuntary oath came, and a cold tingle shot down his spine. Directly below him were four distinct columns of smoke. Even as he stood paralyzed, another puff of smoke started pluming into the air. From long experience, Pat knew that fires would spot ahead, but not this way. These smokes were all about an equal distance apart and in line.

"Something screwy down there," he muttered, and remembered Craig, and his plan to close Maxlin out. This was what Pat had feared. Craig was fighting a crooked man's fight by sending an arsonist into the Maxlin woods.

Cold fury swept over Pat Stevens as his caulks bit into the logs on his wild scramble down the hill. To a fire warden, there is no criminal lower than a man who wantonly seeks to destroy the timber nature has taken centuries to grow. Later he would deal with Craig. Right now only one thought was in his mind. He had

to catch the man who had done this. He rushed on, jumping and vaulting logs.

By the time Pat reached the first fire it was too big to put out without a shovel. He ran on to the second fire, pausing only an instant for a quick glance around. Something just at the edge of the spreading flames caught his eye. *A knife!*

Pat picked up the knife and examined it. It was long and bone-handled. An idea kept nagging at his mind that he'd seen it before, but for the moment he couldn't place just when or where. He stuck it in his pocket and rushed on after the firebug, but the man had disappeared.

The last two fires were still small enough for Pat to stamp out. When he had made sure his man was gone, he returned to the trestle. Bitter disappointment welled up within him. He'd put the firebug to flight, and for the moment he'd stopped the fiend's work, but there'd always be trouble until he had the arsonist behind lock and key.

"How's things down there?" Hogan asked as Pat came up the steep grade to the top of the bridge.

"Not so good if that speeder doesn't get here," Pat answered. "Some skunk's been setting new fires on us. Say, do you know who owns a knife—" Pat didn't finish his sentence. He had just seen Jake Pinson coming up to the top of the railroad grade across the canyon from him, and a sudden tide of memory told him where he'd seen that knife before. It had been in Pinson's hand the day Pat had come to camp. "Never mind, Hogan," Stevens said then. "I've got a little rat-extermimating to do."

Pat raced across the narrowly-spaced ties toward Pinson. The man looked up, saw Pat, and must have guessed that the warden knew the truth. Pinson glanced around for a means of escape. Suddenly he turned and ran back down the side of the canyon toward the fire line.

Pat was right on Pinson's heels, but the man had chosen the right direction in which to run. Size made little difference among brush and logs. If anything, the small man had an advantage. Once in the heavy smoke, he had more than a fair chance of getting away.

Careless of the chances of getting a broken leg, Pat charged on, and just at

the edge of the hottest part of the fire he caught Pinson. For a moment they were together in a wild-free-for-all. The smoke was too thick for scientific fighting, and the hot bed of coals inside the fire line killed any chance of footwork. It was a fight of arms and knees and twisting bodies.

Above their grunts and muffled oaths and the snap of burning limbs they heard the call that makes all loggers pause and look around. From the hillside above a set of fallers were yelling, "*TIM-BER! Down the hill!*" Even as they looked up, a giant snag started crashing forward.

Both men forgot their fight in the urgency of getting out of the way of the mighty tree. They scrambled toward safety, but Pat was luckier than the firebug. A fragment of the top broke loose and hit Pinson on the back, sending him sprawling into a bed of hot coals beneath a blazing log. Pat heard him scream, saw the man twist frantically.

Pat turned and vaulted over the snag. He reached Pinson, pulled and tugged at the injured man. The heat of the blaze seared his face. Sparks burned his hands. Somehow the intensity of that moment gave Pat the strength to jerk Pinson free of an awful death.

With one last surge of reserve power Pat dragged Pinson out of the fire and smoke to the clear air. He yelled to the fallers above him. Then, as they rushed down the hill and came within earshot, Pat had the strength to say, "Here's the man, boys. He dropped his knife back—"

That was all. Pat Stevens became unconscious.

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WHEN Pat opened his eyes it was to find himself in the clean white room of the hospital. As his vision cleared, he made out the huge, homely face of Mule Hogan. Behind him was Warden Clayborne.

"How do you feel, Pat?" Clayborne asked.

Pat managed a weak grin that cracked his blistered face. "Fine," he said thickly.

"Pinson confessed," Clayborne said. "He regained consciousness a few mo-

ments ago and sure gave us a statement."

"Is he going to make it?" Pat asked.

Clayborne nodded. "He'll make it, all right. Live to a ripe old age in jail. He was really working for Craig, as you probably guessed. At first he pretended to be your friend so you'd crack down on the camp. Craig figured you'd enforce the fire laws and that would hold Maxlin up so he couldn't meet his payments.

"When that didn't work, Craig ordered Pinson to burn the Jessup trestle. He thought he had the fire along so far you couldn't stop it, but your ordering the hose threw a monkey wrench into his plans, so he set out to spread the fire. We've picked up Craig, and with Pinson's confession, we'll tuck him into the callaboose right along side the gent he hired to do his dirty work."

Clayborne paused, then looked down at Pat. "You've done a nice job, Stevens," he said slowly. "Hogan, here, says you've had a little difficulty, but when you get back to camp, I've got a hunch you'll find things different."

"You sure as hell will!" Hogan blurted. "From now on, there's going to be nothing but co-operation between me and you. I'll kick the first bird in the pants that don't jump when you holler."

"Show him what you brought him," Clayborne said, nudging Hogan in the ribs with his elbow.

The big man swallowed, threw a look at Pat, and then stepped into the hall. In a moment he was back, holding out a handful of pansies.

"I ain't much on this kind of stuff, Stevens," he said gruffly, "but, damn it, I thought maybe you'd get well faster looking at something like this."

"Pansies!" Pat howled, and shook a bandaged fist at Hogan. "Just wait till I get out of bed!"

Big Mule Hogan grinned. "I thought you'd like 'em," he said. Then, to Clayborne: "He ain't hurt much or he couldn't holler like that. I bet he'll be up and on the job in a couple of days."

Pat's head dropped back against his pillow. For the moment his burns didn't hurt. In fact, he felt mighty good. From now on he wouldn't have any trouble getting the Maxlin Logging Company to obey the fire rules.



When Jack Bellew, fugitive, stripped off his dead brother's uniform, he thought he'd found sanctuary from the hounding law. Yet there was another law which decreed that he face destruction so that a dead trooper might live!

He turned toward the dead man.

TROOPERS' BLOOD

By E. E. Halleran

LOWRY saw it all through the wisps of morning mist. In the thicket where he had hidden during the night he had heard the pounding hoofbeats, and then he had looked down to where the dirt road bent sharply around the slope of the hill. The blue-clad trooper must have been sleeping in the saddle as his dusty mount slogged wearily along. Four galloping riders had met the man at the bend and before he could draw a weapon, he had been shot from the saddle, the quartet hurrying on without even a backward glance.

Lowry scrambled quickly down the hill. He knew that he was running a risk, but that was part of the game. All the way up the Santa Fe trail he had been taking long gambles. A man with a price on his head had to get used to the idea—and he needed that horse!

The animal had stopped quickly and it was no trick to catch him. "Maybe it's my lucky day," Lowry murmured aloud. "I'm sure due for one!"

He rode back to where the trooper lay sprawled in the road. The man ought to have a gun. Lowry's had been lost with

his horse in that disastrous crossing of the Cimarron. He slid from the saddle, looping the reins over a low tree limb, and turned toward the dead man. It was then that Mike Lowry, Border gunman and bank bandit, got the shock of his life.

The fallen trooper was lying on his back and the face which stared sightlessly into the morning sky was that of Mike Lowry. The same high forehead and straight brows. The same stubble of coppery beard on lean jaw. The same unruly tangle of curly brown hair.

Lowry's lips formed words but no sound came. It had been ten full years since he had seen his younger brother. Tom had been just a button when Mike took the long trail, a kid with great ideas

silent. Lowry went to work quickly, hating what he was doing but making himself sneer to keep up his pose. Tom's death could be his own good fortune.

Ten minutes later he vaulted into the saddle and headed the jaded horse down the road. Just once he looked down at the dead form now clothed in the battered garments of Mike Lowry. "Too bad, kid," he said gruffly. "Not much glory in this mess." Then he was riding away, checking over in his mind the role he would play, a role made possible by the uncanny resemblance between himself and his dead brother.

Two miles down the road he met a squadron of bluecoats. This was the test he must face confidently. It wouldn't take

Verne Hayden was the kind of reckless cowpuncher who'd sign on to ride herd on a hell-bound youngster, even if, to keep his risky job, he had to buck the toughest renegade crew that ever cursed the Brimstone Border! Meet him in J. E. Grinstead's thrilling novel, "Gun-Guardian for the Killer Cub," in the July Ace-High. On sale everywhere May 25th!

of doing great things in the world—and perhaps becoming a hero like Mike, Sr., had fought at Monterrey. Ten years had brought Tom to manhood but Mike recalled with a pang the child he had cuffed around.

His self-recrimination didn't last long, though. Sentiment had never been one of Mike Lowry's weaknesses. The only consideration he had ever shown his family was when he had changed his name. Somehow he had not wanted Tom's ambition to be shadowed by the knowledge that Jack Bellew, the gunman, was his brother.

Now he cursed aloud, forcing back the weakness which had almost penetrated his hard-earned callousness. "What the hell!" he growled. "Nobody but a fool would have been caught in a mess like this!" It was the button's own fault. A smart man would have stayed out of this crazy war between the states. Tom had simply been a glory hunter, crazy for a uniform—and what had it got him? A bullet in the heart from a gang of border outlaws.

He listened for sounds of other riders, but the morning air was now tranquilly

much military knowledge to get by among these half-trained volunteers, and he felt reasonably certain that Tom had come from some distant area where he was not known personally.

"From Colonel Ward to General Lyon, sir," he reported to the boyish lieutenant. "Dispatches."

The officer nodded shortly. "Straight ahead. Have you seen anything of any bushwhackers along this road? Some of Quantrell's gang made a raid last night."

Lowry's mind raced at the name. He had known Quantrell when the cut-throat was known as Charley Hart. So that was the gang responsible for Tom's death! He managed to work up a rueful grin. "I reckon I almost saw too much of 'em, sir," he replied. "We had a bit of a brush back there a piece but they was in almost as big a hurry as me. I got a notion I plugged one of 'em but I didn't wait to find out."

THE lieutenant snapped a command and the grim troopers pushed on past Lowry. The man watched with a half smile. It was a dirty trick to play

on a kid who wanted to be a hero but this was no time to be soft. It couldn't hurt Tom and it would be a big help to a hard-pressed fugitive. That lieutenant would easily identify the dead man as the notorious Jack Bellew—papers left in the pockets would guarantee that—and that would be the end of a hunted life. After the noise died away Mike could easily ditch the uniform and slip away to healthier parts of the country.

He passed the smouldering ruins of a farm house where an aged Negro labored with a spade. Lowry realized that the old fellow was digging a grave. On the ground near the graying ashes of the house lay a white-haired form.

A fierce anger welled up within him as he rode along until he found a wagon train waiting at the roadside. He would have gone on without stopping except that a uniformed officer sat his horse nearby. Lowry wasn't making any false moves now. All he had to do was stay smart.

"Dispatches for General Lyon, sir," he announced, saluting.

The captain returned the courtesy. "I'll take them and give you a receipt," he said briskly. "There's a wounded man here who can ride well enough to take them on. I need every man I can get."

Lowry wanted to swear but didn't. His plan was turning sour already!

The officer motioned toward the trees where a half dozen troopers waited. "Get a fresh horse from Sergeant Kinney. We've just had word that some of Quantrell's murdering thieves are hiding just across the ridge. We're going after them."

"But I met them back along the road," Lowry protested. "A lieutenant and some men were hot after them."

"That was another lot. The gang scattered after they did their dirty work last night. The bunch we're after took a couple of girls from that farm house down the road. Killed the old folks, too."

He turned away abruptly and Lowry headed across toward the waiting men. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad, after all. He would have a fresh horse and a good start into the back country. It should be easy to elude these green soldiers.

Two minutes later he was riding north with the grim men around him. They didn't talk much but he learned the main

facts of the raid. Quantrell had staged one of his regular plunder raids, killing, burning and stealing as he rode.

Lowry had seen a couple of mutilated bodies in one of the wagons as he passed it and his thoughts flashed back to the way Tom had been shot down. Somehow he didn't feel so out of place in the uniform now. Only fools enlisted to fight politicians' battles, but this was something else.

He grimaced a bit sheepishly at the thought. His own career hadn't been pretty, but wanton murder had never been part of any game he had ever played. Men had died before his guns but they had always had their chance to be the killers. Looting and burning of farms, killing of old women and the kidnapping of girls—that was a different matter.

Almost before he realized it they were working down into a hollow where the bandits were supposed to be hiding. A slab shack appeared in a clearing and the captain led the way through a bit of flanking woodland. Four horses were picketed behind the shanty and it seemed likely that this must be a band of four like the one which had killed Tom.

The troopers dismounted and closed in silently, the captain's warning unnecessary. "No shooting until I give the word. We can't risk a stray bullet hitting one of the girls."

They worked to within fifty yards of the house when a jeering voice yelled, "Ain't you tin soldiers about tired o' playin' Injun? We been watchin' you."

A rattle of shots came with the yell but the troopers remained silent and under cover. The captain spoke quietly to the big sergeant who had found Lowry a horse. "Kill any of those sons who shows himself, Sergeant. You're enough of a marksman to risk it. The rest of you are to hold your fire unless they make a break. If they do, shoot the horses!"

Sergeant Kinney's carbine cracked almost as the officer completed the order. A yell came from the cabin and Lowry chuckled enviously, suddenly very anxious to get a crack at these bushwhackers. "You made him yelp," he said.

"Bet he didn't," Kinney said grimly. "I killed him. That was one of his pals doin' the cussin'."

The words had a touch of whimsy but the man's face held no trace of humor. These men were risking their lives to preserve a state of decency they believed in. Lowry felt a quick shame to be masquerading in the uniform as he was. Tom would have fitted here. Mike was just a fraud. . . .

THERE was a long silence from the shanty and the troops moved up to the extreme limit of the woods. Then a voice called, "Hey there, bluebellies! We're comin' out, and the gals will be in front of us. Any shootin' from you fellers and we kill the gals!"

The men around Lowry cursed bitterly. The captain growled and ordered, "Hold your fire. They'll do what they threaten. We'll have to hope for a chance."

Lowry's cold judgment told him that he was in luck. The marauders would get away without a fight. He wouldn't have to risk himself in a battle that was none of his affair.

It was all very clear in his mind, yet a deeper feeling took complete hold of him. He slipped out through the outer fringe of trees.

"I'm going out there, Captain," he said calmly. "They won't shoot the girls when they see just one man coming."

"Don't be a fool. Your orders were to stay here."

Lowry flashed him a queer grin. "I reckon I always was a fool," he retorted, "and I'm a bit deaf. I didn't hear any orders. Wish me luck."

He walked out into the clearing just as two bound girls were shoved through the doorway as a screen for three tough looking bushwhackers.

Lowry felt his throat tighten as he moved forward without a trace of hurry. It took an effort but his voice was casual as he called out, "Wait a bit there, boys. Let's talk this thing over."

The astonished raiders watched him dubiously, too surprised to be sure of their next move. By the time one of them swore and jerked his gun up Lowry was within easy six-gun range.

He grinned a little as his own gun flashed upward. His fear had been that the men would carry out their threat and

shoot the captives. Now he knew that they were aiming at him.

It was all over before the men in the grove could take a hand. Lowry shot calmly, first killing the one man whose gun didn't show. He was the only one who might decide to shoot the girls. Then he turned his attention to the other two, the men who were already firing at him. He had done faster shooting in his hectic past but never had he been more careful. He took two slugs in the middle just before he drew fine on the second man, sending the killer backward on top of his partner.

It took an effort of will to hold his sights steady on the third one and he knew the shot would have to be fired quickly. He could feel himself going, another shot spinning him as it slammed into his ribs. Fortunately both girls went to the ground, exposing the third outlaw and Lowry could see his target clearly in spite of the haze which seemed to be creeping over everything. The man was triggering frantically but Lowry didn't seem to feel the shock of any new hits. He only felt determination to get off that final shot.

It seemed like hours before he fired it but when the gun slammed back against his palm he knew that he had accomplished his purpose. The strange part was that when the captain came to bend over him, he exclaimed wonderingly, "Lord man! How did you ever get three bullets out so fast?"

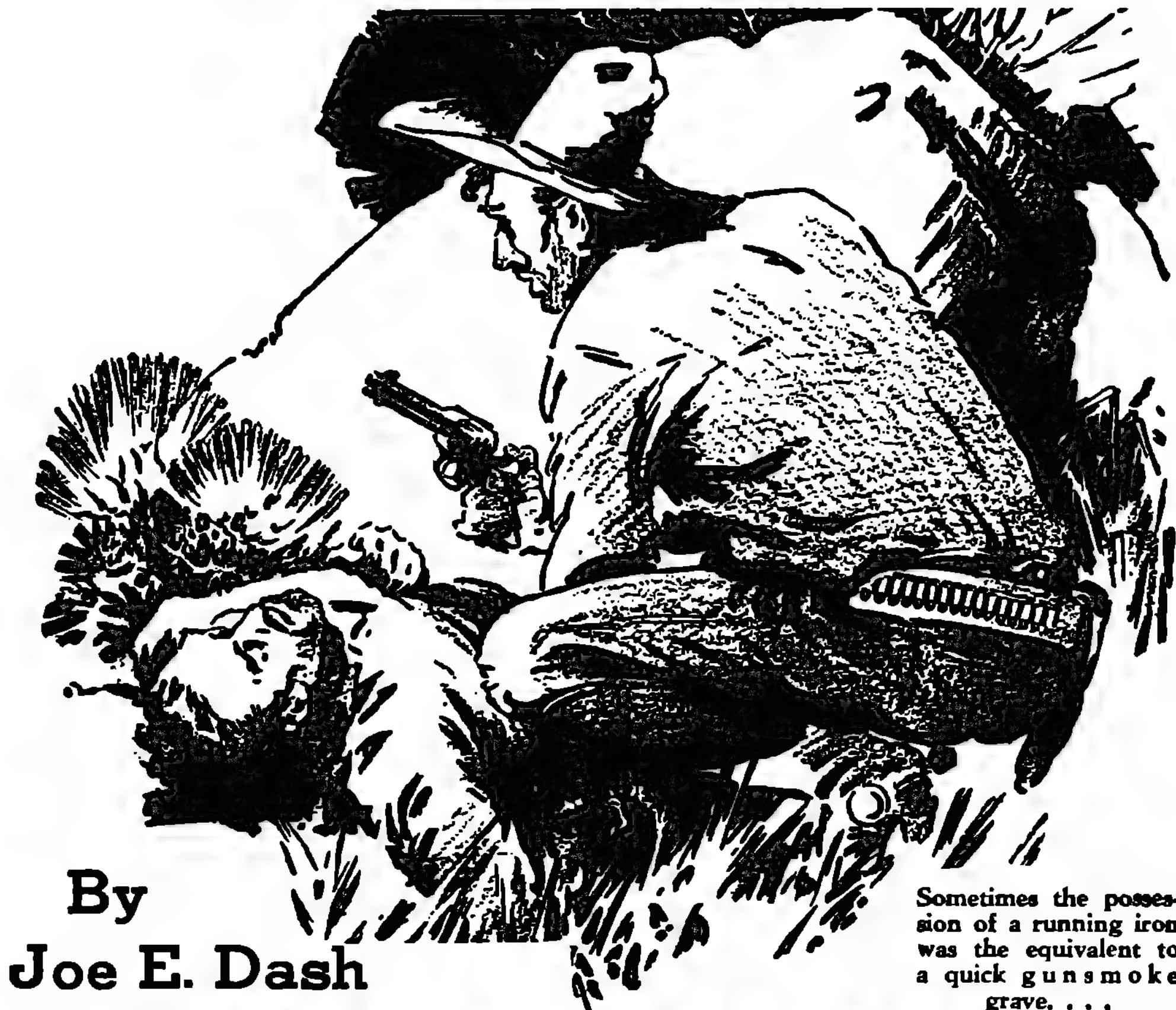
Lowry's smile was very tired. The fight had taken hours! He asked drowsily, "Kids hurt?"

"Not a scratch. You did a . . . Say! Who are you, anyway?"

This time Lowry grinned with weary amusement. Somewhere off in a dream he could see the fuss that folks would make over this stunt. Reformed outlaw goes out in a blaze of glory! Maybe even one of those posthumous medals. A lot of good that would do a dead man!

Then another thought flashed into the strange chaos that was his fading consciousness. He spoke with an effort. "I'm Private Lowry, sir," he gasped. "Private Thomas Lowry."

Maybe that would square things with the kid.



By
Joe E. Dash

Sometimes the possession of a running iron was the equivalent to a quick gun smoke grave. . . .

HOT IRON!

Not always were running irons used by brand-blot artists, but the gent who packed one under his saddle fender better furnish a clean bill of health—or be a candidate for the old cottonwood treatment. . . .

IN THE early days of the West, the running iron was used by most cattle outfits. Big spreads used it extensively, and it was the favorite tool of the rustler. It is still in use by some of the cattle ranchers in the Southwest country—in New Mexico and Arizona. Where there is much open range, the running iron is the most convenient. The running iron is shorter, is easier to pack on the saddle than the long, cumbersome "stamp branding iron."

There are many kinds of running irons; the one most used, is a slender iron rod about two or three feet in length, heated and bent into a half circle at one end thus

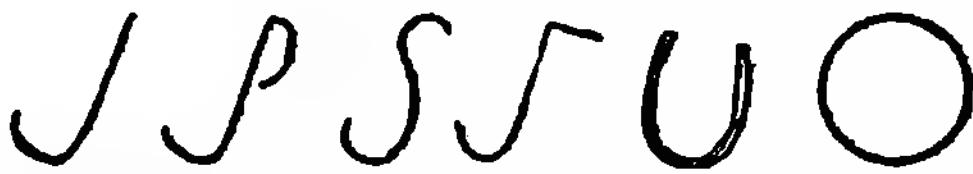
making it like a gooseneck or the figure J. The running iron can be two or only one foot in length. The shorter it is, the more convenient it is to carry. Next to the regular running iron, is the reversed JP iron. The P is merely the handle. Then the S. This iron can be used either way. The J Bar, was another type, also the horseshoe and the cinch ring.

The running iron is used when cow-punchers riding range come upon calves tailing cows of their outfit. The calf is immediately roped, thrown and tied. Then, a fire is made with sage, or anything else that is handy. The iron, whether it is a running iron or cinch ring, is tossed into

the fire, and when heated, the outfit's brand is painted neatly upon the calf's side.

Many cowpunchers preferred carrying a ring. The ring could be an old cinch ring, or any other kind of ring, but the thicker the ring the longer it would hold the heat. Gripped with two sticks, inserted cross-ways, it is used the same as the regular iron. The most convenient way to use the ring is with a pair of good pliers.

Rustlers using the ring, usually had it hidden in their boot leg, or kept under a saddle pocket. Not a few of the rustlers carried an extra piece of blanket under the slicker. With a wet blanket, a skillful rustler could blot out, or alter any brand on the range. Thus equipped, when he



The running iron and cinch ring. . . .

came across an unbranded animal, he was in a position to place his brand upon the maverick—if he considered it safe to do so.

The rustler was generally a game hombre. He took big chances and he always packed a carbine in case inquisitive riders became too interested in his etiquette of the range. There have been times when possession of a running iron constituted a quick introduction to an open-air jury, and to Judge Lynch.

One of the most artistic pieces of brand blotting ever managed was done on one of the biggest ranches in Texas.

The brand was the XIT. The rustler covered the XIT neatly, and stole so many cattle, that the owners of the XIT outfit, paid the rustler a large sum of money to show them how he blotted out their brand, and then they let him go as they had promised.

It was simple enough when you saw it done. The rustler merely followed the lines of the XIT, covered them complete-

ly, and left in place his brand a Star I—as the illustrations show.



The technique of blotting out the XIT. . . .

Today, one hardly ever sees a running iron on the range. In the Northwest country, practically all branding is done either after the regular round-ups, under fence, in corrals, and in chutes.

Now, the open range has given way to fenced pastures. Cattle trails of old have turned into steel tracks. Truly, the Old West has faded into the chapters of history. But cattle are still branded, and there are many ranches in the West, still running their cattle where open range can be procured.

Here are a few of the famous brands of the cow-country, many still in use: the XIT, of the Capital Land Company, the Four 6's of S. B. Burnette, and the Monogram brand owned by James F. Perry—discovered to be the original brand of Stephen F. Austin. Among other brands are the SMS of Swenson Bros., the Lazy F of Anna Martin and Sons, the Lazy S of Colonel C. C. Slaughter, the Running M of E. B. Millet, the Running W of the H. N. King estate, the JA of Charles Goodnight, the OK of Dillard Fent, the Two Dot, of Two-Dot Wilson. There are many other famous brands that etched mark into the sides of growing calves.

The West is still cattle country, and probably will be for a long time to come. Today, there are more cattle and better cattle on Western ranges—for example the white-faced Herefords and other pure bred animals. They merely supplanted that old forlorn critter, the longhorn. And instead of having just bones, horns, hides and tallow, the West raises the finest beef cattle in the world, and we in the U.S.A. reap the benefits.

YOUR COPY MAY BE LATE

Because of the exigency of war-time transportation, your magazine may be late sometimes in reaching you. If it does not arrive on time, please do not write complaining of the delay. This delay occurs after the magazine leaves our offices and is caused by conditions beyond control.



There was a single loud report as the muzzle of the Kid's gun jumped and blazed.

At the age of twelve, the Kid called Billy carved out his bloody, inescapable Western destiny—with a knife in human flesh!

TWENTY-ONE NOTCHES FOR BILLY

By James Stevens

BILLY THE KID watched Joe Grant through shifty blue eyes. They were standing in Hargrove's saloon in old Fort Sumner, New Mexico, and Joe was pretending that he was very drunk. He wasn't drunk this time. The Kid could tell he was only acting. But he

had been drunk last week-end, and then he had told everyone just why he had become friendly with the Kid's gang. He was a bad man himself, he had announced to all and sundry. He was a killer, and he was going to kill the Kid and increase his reputation.

Joe Grant had spilled all this when he was deep in his cups last weekend. Since then the Kid had kept an eye skinned for any trick.

Joe staggered against a bystander in good drunken form. As he straightened up he brought the man's gun with him. He stumbled out into the center of the floor and started playing with the gun.

The Kid stepped up behind him and grabbed his arm. "Let me see it," he said. He took the gun out of Grant's hand before he could reply.

The Kid twirled the cylinder so that the next time the trigger was pulled the hammer would fall on the empty chamber. In the days of the old cap and ball pistols most gunmen carried only five bullets in their sixguns. They would let the hammer rest on an empty chamber. It was safer that way, with less danger of shooting off a leg or a foot.

The Kid handed the pistol back to Joe, who did not notice that the hammer was resting on a dead chamber. The Kid lolled back against the bar, watching and waiting. He felt sure that this was the time Joe Grant had in mind, and that at the first opportunity Joe would try to kill him.

Joe continued to play with the pistol until James Chisum came through the swinging doors. John Chisum, the cattle king, was the sworn enemy of Billy the Kid. A thin, foxy little smile played across the Kid's smooth beardless face. Joe Grant was going to do as he had anticipated. He was deliberately going to mistake James for his brother John.

"I'm going to kill you, John Chisum," Grant said fiercely.

"That's not John, you idiot," remonstrated the Kid.

Grant turned on the Kid and pointed the pistol straight at his chest. With a look of savage triumph on his face he slowly pulled the trigger. There was a metallic, empty click as the hammer fell on the dead chamber.

A bewildered, helpless expression wiped out Grant's enraged features. He became panicky. Hastily he fumbled with the cylinder as he realized what had happened. Suddenly he looked up at the Kid.

With a devilish grin across his face, the Kid held one of his heavy revolvers in his left hand.

"Don't shoot, Kid," screamed Grant. "I was only joking."

There was a single loud report as the muzzle of the Kid's gun jumped and blazed forth. Joe Grant fell forward with a bullet in his head.

Δ Δ Δ

BILLY THE KID was the strangest and most unaccountable gunman in the entire West. He was a pale, slight, light-haired boy. He had small, dainty hands and feet. His cheeks were smooth and beardless. He was thoroughly effeminate, and yet he was the coldest blooded killer in the West.

He killed men for the sheer joy of it. His prejudices were often as unreasonable as they were violent. Once he killed an employee of the Overland Stage. When asked why he did it, he laughingly explained, "Well, I needed the horses."

Another time he killed three Mexicans. Again he stated his reason in typical cold-blooded fashion. "I just wanted to see them kick," he said.

At one time he worked for John Chisum, but quarreled with him over wages. The Kid swore that he would get even with Chisum if it was the last thing he ever did. He would have shot Chisum right then and there if it hadn't been for a guard of armed cowboys that surrounded the cattleman.

He organized and became the leader of one of the most desperate gangs of rustlers in the country and carried out raids on Chisum's stock whenever he could. Once he rode into one of Chisum's cow-camps. Barrett Howell was hobbling a cow pony about twenty yards away; he looked up.

The Kid asked Howell, "Do you still work for John Chisum?"

"Yes," the cowboy answered.

The Kid drew his gun and shot Howell through the head, yelling at the same time in his high-pitched voice, "Well, there's your pay!"

The other cowboys sprang to their guns, but as Billy galloped away, he turned in his saddle and fired twice. Two more of Chisum's men fell dead. Then he pulled up on the reins and, covering the remaining cowboys with his pistol, he

made them drop their guns on the sod.

"You tell John Chisum he owes me money," he told them. "I'll credit him with five dollars on the bill every time I kill one of his men. If I kill him, the account is wiped out."

William H. Bonney—that was his real name—was born in New York City but moved West when he was very small. When he was 12 years old he killed a man. A stranger had protected his mother, and Billy was a lad who didn't forget that sort of thing. He never forgot a friend or an enemy. He followed the man around until a drunk started to pick a fight with his hero. Billy jumped on the drunken man's back and stabbed him to death. When the officers started looking for him, Billy ran away.

He got into the Lincoln County Cattle War just when things had started good. For two years this was a guerrilla war between the Murphy-Riley-Dolan faction and the McSween gang. Between two and three hundred men lost their lives before law and order were re-established. The Kid put twelve notches on his gun during this war. Two of his victims were a sheriff and a deputy who came to arrest him.

The Kid would stop at nothing to help a friend, and he would go just as far out of his way to do injury to an enemy. He had a great friendship for his ranch boss, Tunstall. One day Tunstall's body was found. He had been beaten to death by a gang of Murphy's men. The Kid tracked down every man that had had anything to do with the killing and shot them.

Once Billy and his gang were trapped in a burning house. They were surrounded by hostile gunmen. All the gang ran out of the burning house except Billy. They ran for the back fence. Some of them made it and some were shot down on the way.

Then Billy rolled a cigarette and lit it from the burning timber. Calmly he walked through the back door firing both of his pistols as he went. He killed one of the enemy and wounded two others, and jumped over the fence untouched.

BILLY THE KID became such a terror in the West that Pat Garrett was elected sheriff for the principle reason of disposing of the Kid. Pat

organized a posse of twenty-five men and cornered the Kid and his gang in an old cabin at Stinking Springs. The gang surrendered and Garrett put the prisoners in jail.

A mob gathered to lynch the outlaws, but it quickly dispersed when Garrett promised to give the Kid his two six-shooters if they started any trouble. During the whole affair, when the other members of the gang seemed scared stiff, the Kid laughed at the mob and begged Garrett for his pistols.

The Kid was tried and sentenced to die on the gallows. The judge stood the Kid up before the court and said, "You are sentenced to be hanged by the neck until you are dead, dead, dead!"

The Kid laughed in the judge's face and mocked him.

"And you can go to hell, hell, hell!"

Although he was chained hand and foot and constantly guarded, Billy was always confident that he would escape. It was only two weeks before he was to be hanged that he saw his chance. Ollinger, the guard Billy hated, was across the street eating supper at a coffee house. Bell, the other guard, and the Kid were playing seven-up in the jail. Billy faked clumsiness and dropped a card. As Bell stooped over to retrieve the card, the Kid grabbed one of his guns. Then he forced the guard to precede him down the stairs. Bell took a chance and leaped for shelter.

Billy shouted, "Stop!"

When the guard failed to obey the command, the Kid shot him, and Bell dropped at the entrance dead.

Ollinger heard the shot and ran across the street and into the jail. He heard someone say, "Hello, Bob!" He turned and saw his own sawed-off shotgun pointing at him. There was a tremendous roar, and the guard who had kidded and taunted Billy the Kid fell to the floor fairly ripped to pieces with buckshot.

The Kid got the cook to chop the shackles off his feet and saddle a horse for him. Then he kicked open the door to the gun room and took a Winchester and four revolvers.

The Kid could find food and shelter practically any place. People were afraid to turn him down, and they were afraid to turn him in afterward.

During the interim between his prison escape and his death the Kid killed five more men. But in July, 1881, after Sheriff Pat Garrett had been pursuing him for two months, he was killed. He was 21 years old, with a record of having killed a man for each year he had lived. This, he claimed, didn't include Negroes and Mexicans.

The Kid might have left that part of the country and lived to a ripe old age. There was nothing to keep him in New Mexico except his vow to kill two more men before he died—Governor Lew Wallace and Pat Garrett.

Garrett was making the rounds in the community trying to get information concerning the Kid, but the people, if they knew anything, were afraid to talk. One night he called on Peter Maxwell. He stepped into Maxwell's room and told his deputies to wait for him outside on the porch.

Almost the instant Garrett stepped through the door the deputies saw a man, carrying a knife in one hand and a revolver in the other, step up on the porch.

He asked in Spanish, "Who is it?" "Put up your gun," said the deputy. He mistook the Kid for a Mexican. "It is nothing for you to worry about." The deputy got up and started walking toward the Kid.

Sensing that something was wrong, Billy leaped into the house.

The moonlight glimmered faintly in Maxwell's room. The Kid could not make out objects distinctly, and he could not see Garrett at the foot of the bed.

He said, "Say, Pete, who are those fellows out there?"

Garrett recognized the voice and drew his revolver. Billy saw the movement of the shadowy figure for the first time.

"Who is it?" he asked once again in Spanish.

The answer was a deafening roar and a flash of fire that stabbed through the dark room. Billy the Kid dropped to the floor with a bullet in his heart. As he slumped forward, the impact of falling discharged his pistol. It was the first time in the Kid's life that he had asked questions first and shot afterward.



REBEL HORSES SOUTH

Where brother is ranged against brother in a war to the death—a traitor is just a man that picked the wrong side! He's a hero if he wins—but to prove it, Union Private Dick Teacum, fighting for the Confederacy, had to raise more hell with a horse-pistol than all of Pope's cannon at Bull Run! Don't miss this powerful new novel by Dee Linford, on the role a Westerner played in the war between the North and the South!

Also in this issue—

Frederic Bales' great story of a young gun-

slick, who had to prove his right to live by wearing a

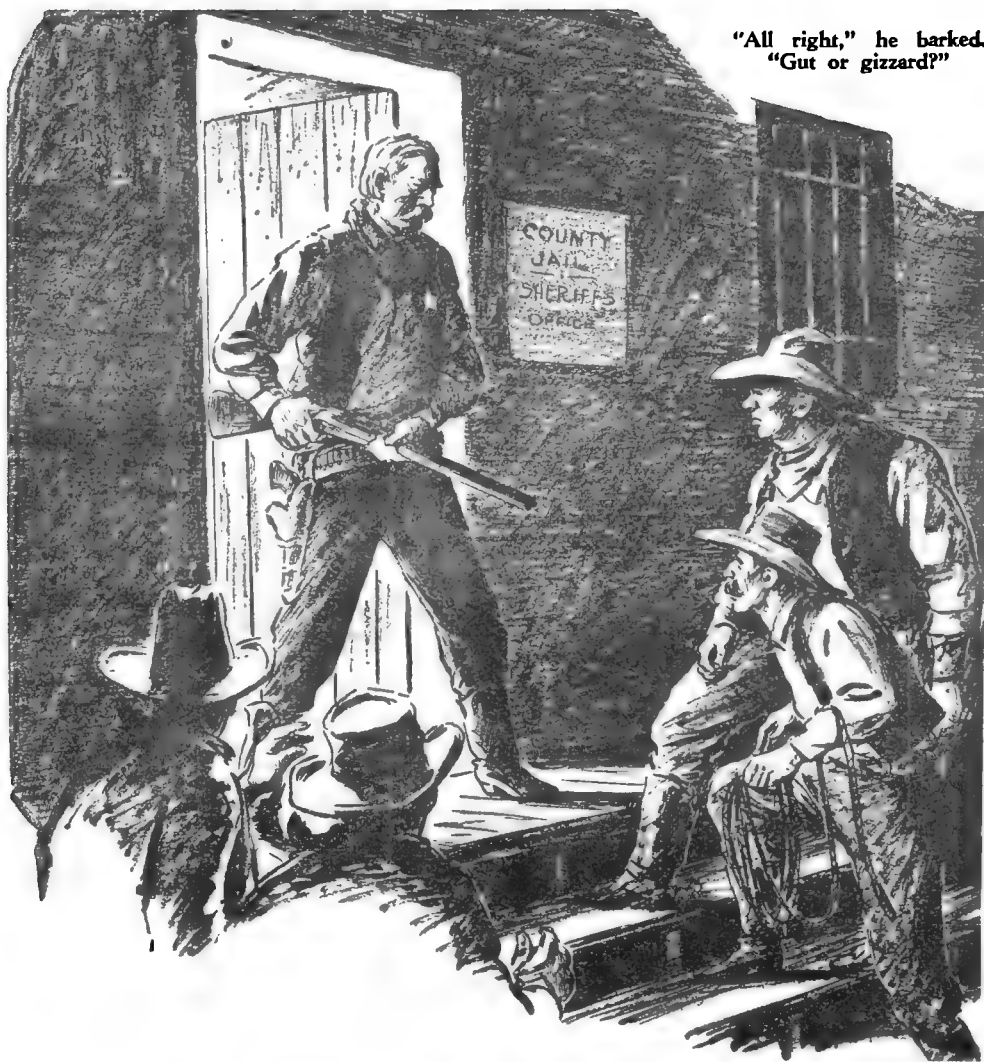
DEAD MAN'S GUN!

Then there's *The Rio Kid's Last Ride*, by Philip Ketchum, and a dozen other stories by such top-string writers as Rod Patterson, Chuck Martin, Tom W. Blackburn, William Henman, Bruce Nelson, Ray P. Shorwell, David Crewe, Harry Van Demark, Les Savage, Glenn Shirley, and others!

Pick up this great July issue at your newsstand now!



LAWMEN LIVE



If old Sheriff Meagan failed to solve that U. S. marshal's murder, he would not only condemn himself to the scrap-heap, but would doom to ruin and misery the honest neighbors he'd fought and bled for!

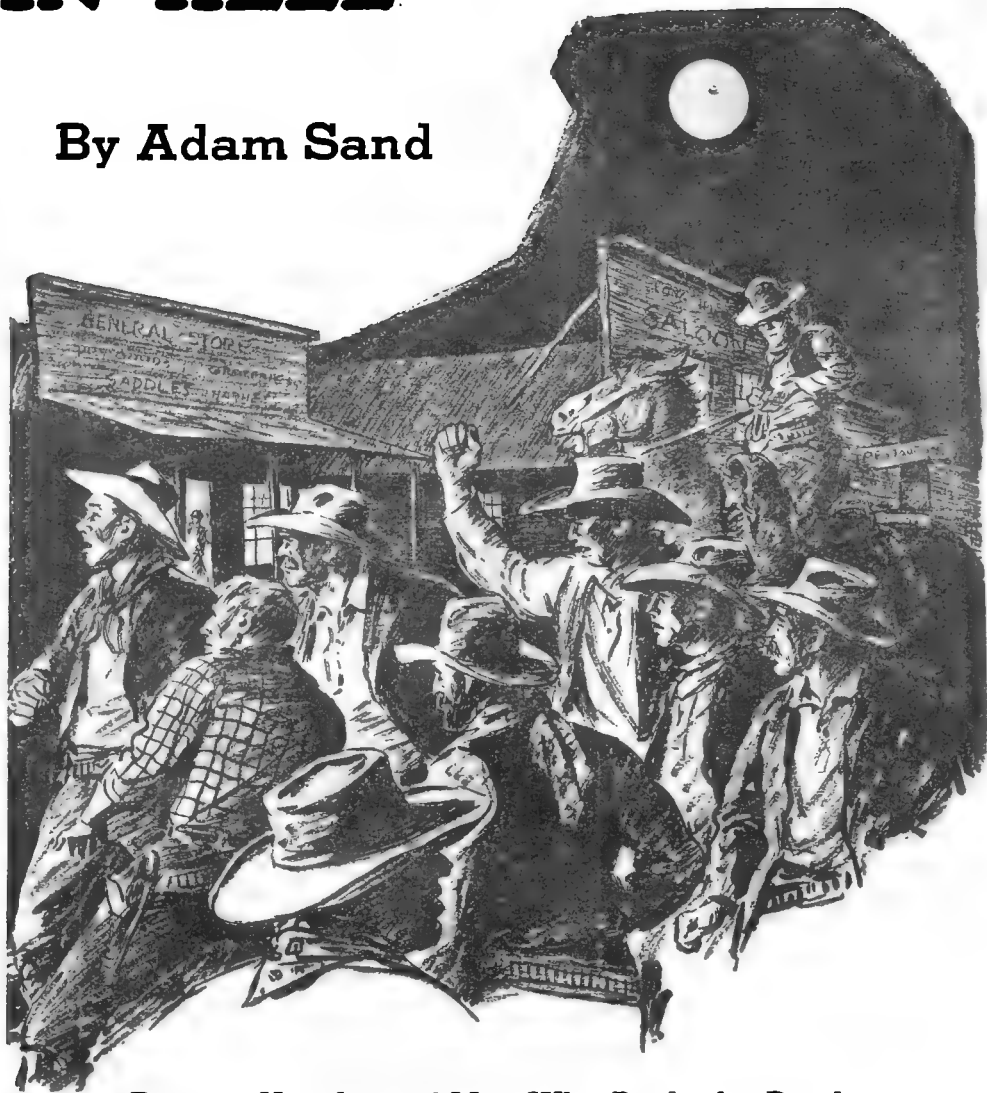
CHAPTER ONE

Shotgun Argument

JIM MEAGAN sat in his office and listened to the growing volume of harsh sounds outside. A blood-hungry mob was not a pleasant thing to listen to. He wondered what Chuck Cummins thought of it, back there in his cell. If Jim managed to dispel the mob, the

IN HELL

By Adam Sand



Roaring Novelette of Men Who Battle the Devil

prisoner might be more disposed to talk. Listening to that wild howling outside his cell window ought to soften up even a stubborn redhead like Chuck.

There was a chilling note of hysteria in the voices of some, as the crowd surged up Bulltail's wide street. When they sounded quite close, the gray-templed sheriff rose from his chair and reached out a steady hand for his scattergun. For more than an hour he had been waiting, expecting this. He was ready. Chuck

Cummins might be a hard-headed young houlihan, but Jim couldn't see him as a killer. There would be no lynching—even if Jim had to vent a couple of fellers.

He stepped quietly through the doorway onto the steps. The shotgun was raised and the curved butt fitted snugly into his right arm pit. His deep voice roared out clearly.

"Hold it!"

The crowd halted abruptly in its mad march. The blue-eyed oldster facing them,

looked grim and tough and capable. They knew from experience what Jim Meagan could do if he saw fit. It appeared as if he was about to see fit. Hence, they stopped in their tracks and spread out a bit before the steps. They continued to make a lot of noise, but they stayed put.

The sheriff swung the double-barreled gun slowly back and forth. Legs spread wide, his piercing gaze darted warily among the crowd of men.

"All right!" he barked. "Name your poison. Gut or gizzard?"

Jim's seamy face did not change expression as a stocky man moved forward from the mob. He kept his poise, but he was mildly surprised that a man like Wide Hinchell was leading a whiskey-brave bunch like this. He'd had the rancher pegged as a different sort. Live and learn! he thought, watching Hinchell's dark eyes blazing up hotly. Yellow lamplight splashed across the rancher's face.

"Don't take the damn' fool's stand in this, Jim," Hinchell spoke crisply. "We're coming in there after Chuck Cummins. You're not going to stop us."

Those in the mob muttered approval. Wide Hinchell took another step and the crowd moved up a notch, slowly, as the ones behind pushed. A yellow-whiskered saloon loungee at the rear bawled loudly: "That's the stuff, Wide. Let's rush him!"

"Poor advice," Jim remarked drily. "I notice you aren't taking it yourself, Elspeth. You *could* rush me, but it would not pay."

Again, Wide Hinchell stirred impatiently. At the movement, the sheriff's left hand stabbed down and came up filled with a sixgun. He lined the revolver on the ranchman's broad chest. At the same time he kept the shotgun trained on the mob, clamping the weapon to his side with his elbow, and supporting it with the hand on the trigger guard.

"Just move the width of a Texas fever-tick's eyebrow, mister," Jim warned coldly, "and you've ordered your coffin. At the same time, I can mow quite a swath among your friends with this scattergun. Be a messy job for Doc Garnet."

Wide Hinchell's bulging eyes were fixed on the muzzle of the sixgun. Sweat ran down his broad face. "Cummins deserves to swing," he spoke hoarsely. "He as

good as admitted he killed Russ Horville, when your deputy arrested him last night. Murdering a Border Patrol officer like Horville is bad, Jim. We'll have a million federal men on our necks if that kind of thing goes on. Give Bulltail a bad rep."

"What kind of rep will we have after a lynching?" Jim demanded scathingly. "Cummins admitted to my deputy, Owl Ormsby, that he'd had a fist fight with Horville, a few hours before the officer was found out in the brush, dead. That's not evidence for murder, Wide. I aim to solve this case before Bob Bookman, the deputy U. S. marshal, gets here sometime tomorrow. I can't do nothing if I got to set here on guard against you loco hombres all the time."

Jim let out a long sigh and swept his gaze around the shuffling, indecisive crowd. He went on bitingly. "If you fellas didn't want real law in this county, you shouldn't have elected a sheriff. You did, and I'm it—until death, or another election, do us part." He allowed a ghost of a smile to touch his stern lips. "Troop over to the Bella Frontier and drown your blood-mad in cool suds—on me. Go on, now. And tell Pudge Smith the sky's the limit."

△ △ △

MUTTERINGS broke out among the members of the crowd. Wide Hinchell made a last angry effort to hold them to their weakening purpose. "Come on, you fools! There's only old Jim—"

"Maybe so," a blocky Bulltailer horned in loudly. "But for my dinero, he's all man!" Somebody on the far edge of the crowd laughed, and the tension broke. Another man remarked humorously:

"Noose fever's all dreened out of my system, jest a'starin' at that there pellet-gun of Jim's. Got nothin' left but a right smart thirst. I'm for the Bella Frontier an' the sheriff's proposition. Reckon the law can handle Cummins. . . ."

"Now you're talking sense," Jim called down. "I've got to earn my wages some way. Taking care of Horville's killer is my job." To himself, he thought bleakly, Whoever the killer is—and, I'd bet my badge it isn't Chuck!

He remembered the day, less than a week ago, when the border officer had walked into his office. There had been slow fire in Horville's gray eyes, fire that belied his short laugh.

"I'm supposed to be on vacation, Jim. But between you and me, that's just a blind. We're trying to get on the track of some human snakes. The vilest kind of hombre that was ever spawned out of hell, Jim. Opium smugglers!"

Jim had sagged back in his chair at the blunt announcement. "Dope, eh?" he grated harshly. "And you think maybe it is coming through your port-of-entry, at Jacales? How does it get by the eagle eyes of your crew, Russ?"

Horville groaned hollowly. "Maybe it isn't, after all. But if it is, I'm damned if I know how. We've been catching hell from our superiors, all along the line. I've fine-combed everything coming through us, Jim. Even all those damned tanned hides of yours!" The officer laughed again, but went serious immediately. "Floods of opium have been turned loose in certain eastern sections of the U. S. If it is getting through Jacales, then most likely it's also coming through Bulltail, being only a few miles apart. If I find the trail, I'll bust things wide open—no matter who gets hurt! It's a rotten business, Jim."

"And a dirty one," Jim had agreed.

Now, a few days later, Russ Horville was dead. Shot in the back, with never a chance to draw his own gun. Had he found what he was looking for—only to pay the supreme penalty for his trouble? Jim aimed to find out. If possible, before U. S. officers like Bob Bookman got to swarming all over the place. It was a matter of pride, yet it was more than that. If some Bulltailer was carrying on a filthy business like Horville had talked of, Jim wanted the personal pleasure of landing the snake where he belonged.

It was for this reason that he had not raised too big a fuss over his well-meaning deputy's stupid arrest of Chuck Cummins. It served to cover his own further investigations. But a lynching was something else again. Once more he wondered at a man of Hinchell's caliber stooping to a thing like this. Anyway, it seemed to be all over now but the shouting. The mob was definitely buffaloed.

The crowd swung around, with loud laughs and joshing to cover their embarrassment at being backed down. Even as they turned a lanky figure came plunging through the office doorway behind the sheriff, holding two heavy .45's. The deputy looked sleepy, but there was no denying he was also primed for action.

"You're a mite late, Owl," Jim remarked dryly. "The show is over."

Owl Ormsby looked sheepish as his big guns drooped. "Shucks," he grumbled. "Whyn't you call me, huh?"

Wide Hinchell had swung away disgustedly, but now he halted as another man came hurrying along the boardwalk. Beside him was a slender girl, her small face pale and intensely worried. The girl brushed past Hinchell, scarcely noticing him, but her companion's glance met Hinchell's for a brief second, as he, too, went by. Silently, Hinchell pivoted and followed the pair into Jim Meagan's office.

Jim was putting away his shotgun, while Ormsby sat disconsolately on the edge of the desk, swinging one foot. Owl got up and raked off his hat as the girl entered ahead of the others.

"Howdy, Miss Berry," the deputy mumbled. "You'd oughtn't of come down. Your Dad come mighty near having some trouble. . . ."

"Dad!" Berry Meagan cried. She flew into Jim's ready arms, and he patted her shoulder reassuringly. "I—I heard all the commotion. . . ."

"Nothing to it," Jim said gruffly. He looked meaningfully at Hinchell, who had crowded in behind Drew Wilson, the young man with Berry. "If you want any further argument on this subject, Wide, you better postpone it."

Hinchell hesitated, glanced briefly at Drew, then shrugged and went out. Drew Wilson's eyes followed Hinchell's broad back until it had disappeared. Then he swung to Jim. Jim Meagan's nephew was tall, smooth featured and good looking. He was clean-cut, always well dressed. Right now his brown eyes held worry.

"I'm sorry I didn't know there was anything going on, Uncle Jim," he said now. "I was working at the plant, when Berry came by and hollered in to me. I—I suppose they were after Chuck Cummins, eh?"

CHAPTER TWO

Cowpoke Clam

JIM MEAGAN nodded. He was gazing fondly from his foster-daughter, to his nephew. A fine pair! It was his secret hope that some day Berry and Drew would marry. As a matter of fact, he couldn't understand what was holding them back. He knew Drew Wilson was crazy about Berry. But the girl, now— How could a man tell or predict what a girl like Berry would do?

Berry let Drew squire her around to dances and so on. She seemed to like him. Still, on the other hand, Jim had heard her refer to Drew as "That stuffed prune." He didn't look like a stuffed prune to Jim's sober way of thinking, and he wished the girl was a little steadier herself.

As for Drew, Jim just about idolized the boy. Always been a whiz in school, Drew had—just about Bulltail's most promising young feller, any way you took him. He had worked awhile in the bank, where Old Abbott said he was the smartest young man he'd ever had. Then Jim had set Drew up in this leather business.

It was really a small factory, where Drew's crew of Mexicans turned out hand made leather articles such as belts, hatbands, holsters, and even saddles. They imported rough-tanned hides from over the border, where they could get them cheaper than over here, even after paying the duty. A lot of Jim's life savings had gone into the business, as silent partner. Still going into it, for that matter. Lately Drew had been coming to him for more than ever, trying to get the concern on a firm footing.

Drew was a smart business man, too. It had been his idea to go below the Mexican border for the leather, and his idea to seek Eastern markets for some of the manufactured articles. He had made a couple of trips back to some big city lately, where he was selling a lot of fancy, hand-embossed belts. Yes sir, Jim Meagan was uncommon proud of Drew Wilson. But of course no one could replace Berry in his affections. Berry's parents had been killed by Indians, and Jim and his wife had taken the baby in and raised her as their own. When Martha died,

Berry took over the house and ran it, slick as a whistle. She still did.

The only drawback Berry had, in Jim's eyes, was her liking for Chuck Cummins. Chuck was a cowboy, and he worked here and there and every place, as fancy struck him. A drifter, Jim thought moodily, not much like old Forty-Five Cummins, Chuck's dad. Jim still suffered from an old wound he'd got at the same fracas where Forty-Five was killed.

Jim hoped Drew didn't find out Berry had been into the jail to see Chuck four times already, since Owl had brought him in last night. Berry certainly shared Jim's secret opinion that Chuck was no killer. Only Berry made no bones about it! She had given Jim 'hail columbia' for keeping the cowboy locked up, until he explained patiently that a lawman had to do a lot of things he had no stomach for. After that she just screwed up her pretty little mouth and went silent.

Jim was vastly relieved that Berry made no move to sashay in to palaver with Chuck, now. She seemed content to let Drew pilot her back to the house. Jim shooed the two of them out of his office. He glanced sourly at his lanky deputy.

"You might's well go back and finish your beauty rest too, Ormsby," he suggested. When Owl started a mild protest, he barked crisply: "I told you to beat it. That's an order!"

Ormsby went out hastily. Jim had no more than subsided into his swivel chair, when a muffled voice from back in the jail suddenly lifted in song:

"Them cowtown folks was plenty
riled,
Rushin' the jailhouse they never
smiled—
'You ornery cowpoke,' they bel-
lered at me,
'We're a'gonna string you to a
willow tree!'
But the graybeard sheriff. . . ."

Jim piled wearily out of his chair and jerked open the door into the jail corridor. He looked grim and determined. That blasted redhead knew something about Horville's murder, no question about that. If he could only find a way to worm

it out of him. For some obscure reason of his own, Chuck Cummins had refused to defend himself, maintaining a stubborn silence. He seemed to have the idea Jim was aching to hang the thing onto him—and make it stick. Hearing Jim's heavy step, he raised his melodious voice to a higher pitch, hammering his boot heels on the stone floor in accompaniment to his song:

"The graybeard sheriff wouldn't stand for that.

Says: 'Hold on, folks, stay right where you're at—

That puncher's guilty, and ridin' to a fall,

But we're a'gonna hang him legal or not at all! "

"Shut up!" Jim grumbled. Stopping at the cell door, he peered in at the red-headed puncher perched on the bunk. A wild, good-looking devil—in a rough-hewed way—Jim conceded. If Chuck was only steadier going now, more like Drew, it wouldn't be so bad Berry wanting to hang around him like she used to when they were kids together. The two of them used to ditch Drew every chance they got. It made Jim hot as a hornet even yet, thinking about it.

"What was that ruckus out front?" Chuck wanted to know innocently.

"It was a lynch mob, dang you—and you know it," Jim said tersely. "I'd ought to of let 'em have you. Bob Bookman will most likely put a chunk of lead in your gizzard when he gets here. Killing a Border Patrolman like Horville is going to rile Bookman plenty. I wish he'd get here," he lied, watching Chuck's face.

The redhead's expression remained maddeningly bland. He remarked drily: "You got such a nice tight case against me—I can imagine you're plumb anxious to show off in front of Bob."

Jim snorted disdainfully. But he red-dened. Chuck had put his finger on a tender spot, all right. Jim's chin jutted out. Somehow or other he had to find out just what this was all about before the deputy marshal got here. If Russ had dug up some real clue on the opium smuggling, it had cost him his life. Jim could dig it out if Russ could, he reasoned—and

run the same drygulch danger, too. . . .

"You ready to speak a piece?" he queried hopefully. Chuck shook his head violently.

"Huh-uh. I never got far enough in school. I'm plumb ignorant."

Jim swore. The redhead knew something, all right. He and Russ Horville had often bummed around together. Sometimes they had scrapped. The day before some farmer found Horville's body in a brush-choked ravine a few miles out of town, Chuck and the officer had pulled a whale of a fist fight in a saloon. That's why Ormsby had arrested Cummins, while Jim was confabbing with Border officers down at Jacales. Jim decided to try a different tack now.

"Even Berry couldn't worm anything out of you," he grunted, slyly. The implication was a bald lie, of course, because Berry had barged back here over Jim's hot protests. The insinuation missed fire anyway. Chuck laughed in his face.

Exasperation got the best of the sheriff. In abrupt recklessness he jammed his key in the lock and threw the cell door open. Chuck stared in slack-jawed amazement.

Jim's shaggy brows beetled. "I don't even get your thanks. Why should I protect you any longer? Beat it out of here!"

Chuck remained plastered to the bunk, making no move. His jaw set grimly. "Oh no, Sheriff! Soon as I run, I'm branded guilty, sure as sin. Me—I'll take my chances in here."

Jim walked into the cell, leaving the door open. "If you're so danged innocent, why in the hell won't you tell me what you know. Russ told me he was on the track of dope smugglers. You know something. What is it?"

Chuck shook his head, greenish eyes flickering strangely. "It's like I told you. I'm the ignorantest cuss in Bulltail."

Jim jerked out his .45. Holding it in his right hand, he brought his left around to smack the cowboy across the face. He felt like seven kinds of a heel, but he was desperate enough now for anything. "Get out of here!" he roared. "Before I plant a slug in your dinner basket."

Chuck stood up slowly. The look he bent on Jim was almost one of pity. Finally he spoke quietly. "All right, you old goat. If that's the way you feel about

it. Yapp along on the scent like a loco old bloodhound. But don't blame me if it's yourself that get's hurt." He made for the hall and the back door. "Adios!"

With a cocky grin and a hand raised in a mocking salute, the redhead was gone. As the door closed behind him, Jim Meagan galvanized into action. Plunging into the corridor, he raced down the hall to the rear door, which he jerked open softly. He slid out into the cluttered rear alley and peered into the gloom. Chuck's tall figure was just disappearing into the dark back door of a livery barn a hundred feet away.

"Now," Jim muttered grimly, letting out a gusty breath and moving out into the darkness. "If I can just keep that crazy young galoot in sight I may find out what kind of devil's game he's got himself mixed up into. If I lose him, I'll have a hot time explaining this to Bob Bookman. . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

Satan's Salesman

DREW WILSON was plenty worried. The way he figured it, it was just about a hundred to one shot this damn' murder would gum things up for good. In a few more months he could have cleaned up a tidy fortune and got to hell out of the whole messy business. *Belts*—my God, what an idea! A thousand dollars apiece for leather belts! Of course, Wide Hinchell had thought it all out. Clever hombre, Wide.

The girl at his side looked up into his tense, dark face, and queried anxiously, "What on earth is the matter with you, Drew? You're muttering and grumbling like a heat-loco prospector." Her gray eyes softened and she squeezed his arm.

"Is all that dark worry for poor Chuck?"

"Damn' Ch—that is, yes, I suppose it is!" Drew grumbled jerkily.

As they went along the street toward the residential section of town, Berry declared fiercely. "It's just a shame that Ormsby had to arrest Chuck—now every body thinks he's guilty."

Drew's eyes turned toward her pale, earnest face. "Don't *you* think so, Berry?

After all, Chuck doesn't have too good a reputation." He said this smugly, with such obvious self-approval that the girl moved a pace away from him involuntarily. He noticed this and flushed. "You don't think it's anything to be prominent and well thought of and—uh—industrious," he accused. "You've never appreciated me, Berry, and yet I've done everything for you."

"Have you, Drew?" she said with indifference that irked him further.

He grabbed her shoulder and swung her to face him in the dusky street. "Look here!" he demanded hotly. "Are you still mooning over some kind of puppy love affair with that—that shiftless saddle-bum?"

Her face went red, then white. "I'm not in love with anybody, Drew," she said in a level voice. "But don't be slinging mud at my friends. Because he is my friend, and he never killed Russ Horville. Dad doesn't think so either—I can tell."

Icy fear gripped Drew. He summoned all his guile now, with a strong effort. "I'm sorry, Berry," he murmured. "I'm just upset. Working too hard, I guess." He watched her face covertly as he put an adroit question in a casual tone. "Just what *does* Uncle Jim think about the killing, Berry. Uh—doesn't the opinion of the entire town satisfy him?"

"I don't know what he really knows, or believes. But I do know Dad will never rest until he has the real killer of Horville under arrest—and finds out why the Patrol officer was killed, too!"

With that the girl wheeled and ran up the pathway to the sheriff's old house. Drew sucked in a long breath as the door closed behind her. He was filled with real fear as he went back down the street, heading toward the plant. He licked dry lips and put up a shaking hand to wipe the sweat from his cheek. No question about it, he'd have to speak to Wide Hinchell about Uncle Jim.

He shuddered. He had never realized the thing could go so far. . . .

Drew let himself cautiously into his office, where a dim light burned—a smoky old lantern turned low. His eyes popped out as he saw an untidy form sprawled on the floor. His heart almost stopped beat-

ing. Then the figure stirred, and sat up. Drew choked on a piece of air. God, but he was getting jumpy! The ancient Mexican on the floor stared up at him sleepily.

"Señor!" he whispered hoarsely. "A long time I wait. The leench, she don' come off, eh?" His yellowed stumps of teeth showed as he grinned and stood up creakingly. "The Señor Carlos good friend to all the Mexicanos. I not like to see heem dangle from the rope!"

"Shut up, Manuel!" Drew growled. "Get in the back there and thread up that stitching machine. I told you to come down here for some extra work, not to babble like an old woman. . ."

"Si, señor!" Manuel grunted.

For a half hour he directed the aged Mexican in sewing up the edges of the belts. They had finished the last one, and Drew was gathering them together, when Manuel Chavez straightened from the stitching machine and turned quickly. There was a gun in his hand, pointed into Drew's middle. Manuel looked just shaky enough to pull the trigger before he explained what he wanted. Drew's eyes widened and his handsome face went pale. Manuel nodded, with a low-throated chuckle.

"Si, Señor Weelson. I mean beesiness. Ordinary, the Mexicano she don't interfere in gringo affairs. But, as I say, Chuck Cummins friend to my people. We take these belt which you so carefully sew up, and we geeve them to your uncle, the sheriff. Come—I theenk the Señor Jeem like to know about thees. . . ."

Drew got hold of himself a little, tried blustering. "You damned Mex—I'll fire you and all your blasted sons and cousins and aunts that are working for me. I'll drive every last one of you out of Bulltail. I'll—"

Manuel shrugged and plucked the dangling belts from Drew's loose fingers. Behind the Mexican a shadow stirred fur-

tively, and Drew hooded his scared eyes.

"Come," Manuel repeated softly, moving the gun a little. "I tell what I have guessed to Jeem Meagan. He weel know what best to do. Two men in Bulltail suspect what you and that gringo, Hinchell, are up to. One is Señor Horville. He you have kill. But I weel not wait for thees—"

A long arm swept down out of the deep shadows behind the ancient leather worker. A gun butt connected solidly with Manuel's skull and the Mexican slumped forward with a deep groan. Wide Hinchell stepped forward, a crooked grin on his thick lips as he hammered down once more on the unprotected head. Bones crushed sickeningly and Manuel sprawled to the floor. He writhed slightly before he lay still.

Hinchell stirred the dead man with his foot. He spat on the tattered old coat, then stooped to gather up the belts, which had fallen to the floor.

"Damned interfering old buzzard," he muttered callously. He spoke crisply to Drew, who stood frozen in his tracks. "Come on back into the office, you weak-livered fool. I should have known better than to let you handle any of this when I wasn't around to watch over your shoulder."

Drew Wilson found his tongue. His whisper was hoarse and broken. "God, Wide! What're we going to do? We can't blame this one onto Cummins! You shouldn't have hit him so hard. . . ."

Wide's laugh was thin and mirthless. "Maybe we could, at that. But we're not going to. I think it would be better to get rid of the body. First, though, we'll have a little palaver in the office."

When the stitched belts were once more safely deposited in Drew Wilson's iron safe, the two men sat down near the big desk. The fine, rich odor of leathers

YOU CAN'T beat a Panzer Division with a pea-shooter, nor knock down Zeros with sling-shots! Make sure that our service men will never have to fight without effective weapons—by going over your ten per cent quota, and—

BUY MORE U.S. WAR SAVINGS BONDS — EVERY PAY-DAY!

drifted in from the factory, but for once, Drew wasn't enjoying the atmosphere of his business. He kept shooting nervous glances toward the darkened factory room, where Manuel's body lay as it had fallen. He lifted his gaze to Wide Hinchell's blocky, impassive countenance.

"What'd you mean—we could hang this killing onto Cummins like we did the other one? Locked up in a cell in Uncle Jim's jail, he'd have a pretty hard time getting—"

Wide Hinchell chuckled. But the worry in his face was plain to the younger man. "Cummins is not in jail," Wide announced calmly. "I just found out."

Drew's first reaction was relief. He settled back in his chair and laughed. "Then if Chuck escaped, he's practically sealed his own doom. Uncle Jim is bound to think he's guilty—and the jury's bound to, when he's caught and the trial comes up. It means we won't have to try another lynching."

"I'm not so sure," Wide spoke up, musingly. "I can't figure Cummins getting out of jail so easy. I stopped in to see Jim a minute ago, and he claimed the redhead had a gun hid out, and forced him to open the cell door. I think Jim turned him loose! That old fox is wise—he's sure to smell us out, like Russ did."

Drew began to tremble again. He chewed nervously on his fingernails. "Then we—we got to take care of Uncle Jim, too—like Horville and Manuel?"

Wide Hinchell grinned, a chill grimace that added nothing to his looks.

"We'll stop him, all right," Hinchell grunted. "*Tonight!* We'll put that new shipment with the rest of the stuff—and take the train East tomorrow."

"I'll be glad when we're on it!" Drew muttered. He began to grin, thinking about it. "By the time we get back with the dinero, things will be quieted down again. Then I'll go to work on Berry. We'll leave Jim's body to be found, huh? With Cummins on the loose again, it'll swing back to him, sure. If Bookman nails him, swell. If he gets across the border, it's just as good for us."

"Yeah," Hinchell grunted. "Now about tonight's little chores. Manuel—quicksand—" His voice dropped to a monotone as he outlined his plan.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dead Man's Drygulch

JIM MEAGAN sighed heavily as he finished a long and involved report relating "how that redheaded hellion busted out of jail." He hoped it sounded convincing enough to hold Bob Bookman, or anybody else who wanted to know how-come. He folded the paper and stuck it in a pigeon hole of his desk, then turned to peer at the blackness outside his window.

"I'd give my best sixgun to know how that young devil disappeared so quick. If I guessed wrong about him, there'll be hell to pay. Might be anyway!"

He rose then and blew out the lamp. "Might's well go home," he muttered. "For all the good I'm doing here." He went out the front door of the office, closed it behind him. He stooped to lock the door with the big iron key—and almost shoved it through a square of white paper that was pinned under the knob.

Wonderingly, he jerked off the paper. "Now what in—" He stepped inside again, cursing softly as he burned his hand on the hot lamp chimney, relighting it. His keen eyes speared down to the scrawled words of the note. It said:

Got a hot tip on Horville's killing. Come to that old shack near the big bend in Coyote Creek. Right away. It won't keep!

A moment later the sheriff's office was again in darkness and Jim was trotting down the back alley toward the hotel. He paused under a ground-floor window, reached inside and grabbed a handful of covers. He pulled them half out the window, and they were soon followed by the sleepy face of Owl Ormsby. The deputy had a gun in his hand. His swearing was colorful, if not pretty. He cut it off short when he saw who it was.

"That's a heck of a way to wake a man up," he complained. Jim Meagan grinned.

"Never mind—it might o' been a bucket of cold water. For a guy named Owl, you sure sleep good. Now look, mister. I'm going for a little midnight ride. It's most likely a snipe hunt, and I *don't* want company. But you see if you can drag your carcass out of the sougans around day-

light. Go up to my house and find out from Berry if I got home. If I did, you better not roust me out if you value your hide. If I didn't, high-tail it out to that deserted old shack near the big bend of Coyote. Come primed, and walk easy."

"Y-yeah," Owl grunted, blinking. "And what else?"

"That's it," Jim told him. He added vindictively. "Don't arrest Chuck Cummins while I'm gone. He busted out of jail."

An hour of stiff riding brought him to the first cutbank where the land sloped away toward the wide basin of Coyote Creek. Not more than a mile now to the shack. Jim shifted uneasily in the saddle, peering ahead now warily. He was recalling that it was right along here that Russ Horville's body had been found. A night-hawk shrilled under his horse's feet, flying up on soft wings. The horse snorted, broke gait slightly.

A quarter mile ahead the trail dropped into a narrow gorge, between brushy embankments. Jim's breath came a little faster as he stared across the gloomy slopes. It would, he reflected somberly, be a mighty fine place for a drygulching, if anybody was in a mind to—

The thought broke off with the sound of a feathery swish behind him, like the ghostly swoop of an owl's flight. But there was nothing soft or feather-like about the maguey rope that dropped in a deadly noose around his body. The loop snicked tighter, binding his arms. His reaction was instantaneous.

He didn't yell, or fight the rope. Instead he vaulted from the saddle, landing in the trail on his feet. The trained horse stopped in his tracks. Jim whirled, got a glimpse of the dim figure in the brush, heels jammed into the ground as he hauled on the rope. Jim tripped, stumbled to his face, skinning himself on rocks and brush. Grunting, he surged to his knees, forcing his arms outward. The noose loosened as he threw himself bodily on his attacker.

They went down in a tangle of arms and legs and rope. They rolled clear of the shadows, into a small patch of moonlight. Jim got his first glimpse of the man's face, as he was forced underneath. It was Chuck Cummins!

"Why you damned—" he began. The

redhead grinned down at him, breath coming in choppy pants, white teeth gleaming. He choked the sheriff's speech off short bending his mouth close to Jim.

"Lay still, you old billy goat!" Chuck whispered. Sweat dripped off the younger man's face onto Jim's. "You're a tough old nut to crack, Jim. Danged if you ain't. I don't want to pull a gun on you if I don't have to. Will you set still like a good daddy-in-law ought to, while I show you something? Wasn't sure you'd stop for a mere sixgun," he added apologetically.

There wasn't much less Jim could do, after Chuck deprived him of his .45 and trussed him up with the maguey. "After turnin' you loose of my own accord, I feel like a fool," he grumbled, as Chuck dragged him to his feet. "What the seventeen devils are you up to? And what you mean, daddy-in-law!"

"Twist around you and see what's layin' there," Chuck suggested. "You almost fell on it." The redhead sounded hurried. "Berry says she'll marry me," he added.

Jim twisted his head painfully, then let out a ragged gust of breath. The ominous, ghost-like shape lying there in the brush—It was a corpse! "You'll have to take my word—it's murder and I didn't do it," Chuck stated tersely. "It used to be a Mexican named Manuel Chavez. Now you just set there and watch. . . ."

Chuck stooped, shouldered the stiff body of the Mexican with a grunt. He stalked to Jim's horse and slid Manuel's legs over the seat. "Stiff enough to stay upright, I reckon," he surmised. "With a little tying in the right places." He busied himself for a few minutes, then stepped back. Almost as an afterthought he scooped up Jim Meagan's fallen hat and stuck it on the dead man's head.

"I knew you were a loco young jigger," Jim growled, straining against the ropes. "Now you turned out to be some kind of a fiend, huh?" His mind was racing. Where the deuce had Chuck found the body, and what kind of crazy stunt—Then he began to get it and his mouth shut with an almost audible snap.

"Danged if Chavez don't look almost like me—in the moonlight, and on my pony," he admitted. "Now you're getting smart," Chuck nodded. He slapped the

pony on the rump, started it down the trail. Chuck crouched beside Jim. They could see the trail clear on down into the narrow gorge. Jim didn't have to be told to keep quiet now. He kept still and watched.

He didn't have long to wait. The moving horse was fading into the shadows a quarter mile distant when thin streaks of fire cut down from the brushy flanks. The reports of guns—two guns—came at the same instant. Jim could see Manuel's body tilt sideways, then the horse pitched wildly. The body flew off into the brush and the horse raced away down the canyon.

"The dirty skunks—" Jim began. "They thought that was—"

Chuck jammed a hand over his mouth, held his squirming body down. "Lay low, dang you," the redhead hissed in his ear. Two figures straightened up in the brush down there atop the bluff. They stared down into the canyon, then a harsh laugh drifted up to Jim's ears. The drygulchers turned then, and melted back into the shadows of the brush. Jim struggled.

"Drat you!" he managed to grunt. "Ain't we going after them two hombres?"

"Not any!" Chuck asserted firmly, keeping his grip on the sheriff. Jim let out a string of muttered curses. Finally he ground out questioningly, "Where'd you get Chavez' body—if you didn't kill him yourself, of which I ain't in no way convinced."

"I hauled the remains out of a quicksand hole down yonder in the Coyote," the redhead told him. "By a strange series of circumstances, he hadn't sunk yet when I got there. Then I just follered a couple hombres, curious-like."

"Which could mean you saw him bein' tossed in—or helped with the tossin'," Jim growled. He added complainingly, "That's the trouble with you, Chuck. You are always up to your ears in some devious devilment that'd make old Forty-Five roll over in his grave. Take Drew Wilson, now. He's different. Steady and hardworking, that boy. It'd just about kill me if he'd of turned out as loco as you are."

Chuck looked at him with a strange glint in his eyes. "That's what Berry tells me," he murmured. He stood up abruptly,

hauled Jim to his feet again. "I guess those would-be bushwhackers are gone now. Me and you are heading back to town. By that same strange series of circumstances I mentioned, I got two horses back here in the brush. Curious, ain't it? At least you can't claim I wasn't grateful for you stallin' off a lynch mob for me, Jim."

△ △ △

THEY were half-way back to town when Jim Meagan queried suddenly. "What all do you know about the opium smuggling Russ Horville was investigating, Chuck?"

The redheaded puncher turned a guileless countenance toward him. He made clucking noises with his tongue. "Opium? Dear me! So that's what's behind all this killing, eh?"

He tugged on the reins of Jim's horse, which he was leading. The sheriff swore again, then went on persistently. "You know dang well it is. Horville found out the stuff *was* coming through Jacales and Bulltail, and he got murdered for his pains. Probably Chavez was in the ring. Who else is in it, besides maybe yourself—and Hinchell," he added, with sudden perception. There was a tinge of excitement in his voice now. "Who was that other hombre with Hinchell, aiming to salivate me down there in the gulch?"

"You were smart enough to dope out Hinchell," Chuck countered. "Figure out the other hombre. I'll give you a clue. He's eight feet tall, has purple hair and sky-blue-pink eyes." The redhead's mouth was grinning, but his face wore a suddenly old and tired look, as if he was weighted down with care. Jim sighed deeply.

"You're shielding somebody, dang you. I'll find out soon—if I live."

Chuck Cummins remained silent, spurring his horse to a faster pace. They hit the first houses of Bulltail in the gray gloom of early dawn. Chuck took a back alley, abruptly swung left into the yawning door of a tumble-down barn. Jim grunted in surprise.

"So you bring me to my own house, huh? Very considerate of you."

Chuck's teeth shone. "My idea was a nice cold cell in your own jail. But Berry

wants to keep you snug and comfy. I got business to tend to, and I don't want you messing around. Come on, now, pile off that cayuse. We're goin' in the house."

Jim was hoping he'd get his arms untied. But no such luck. It was with a rampaging mixture of emotions, some of them molten as lava, that he was ushered into the kitchen of his own house. Berry was drinking coffee, her eyes droopy from lack of sleep. She got up quickly, kissing them both. Her pale face was vastly relieved.

"I was beginning to think that maybe they—"

"But they didn't," Chuck told her with a cocky grin. He kissed her again and Jim snorted angrily.

"I'm plumb disgusted with you, Berry. Conivin' with this no-account jigger." He went suddenly grim, his jaws hardening. "Maybe you kids don't know it, but opium running is the dirtiest business in the world. It ruins hundreds of lives. It ain't a thing to be took lightly. Russ Horville was murdered tryin' to pin it on somebody. I come close to gettin' mine tonight—for which I'm thankin' Chuck for snaking me out of. But I've had enough of this hindering the law for some loco whims of your own. Turn me loose!"

Berry hugged him impulsively, then stepped back, her eyes shining. "You're absolutely right, Dad. So we're not turning you loose—not yet. Tie him into a kitchen chair, Chuck. Then you better be getting—"

"No fooling," Chuck grunted. "I sure better." His fingers had a strange gentleness as he bound the disgruntled lawman into a chair, then stepped to the door. With his cocky, impudent salute, the red-head was gone.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sixgun Smash-Up

IT WAS nearly an hour later when Jim Meagan heard the rattle of wagon wheels in the street out front. "See what that is," he told Berry querulously. The girl obediently went through the house, peered out the front window. She came back in a minute. Her hand was shaking as she poured him some coffee.

"Who was it?" he asked again. She shrugged her nice shoulders.

"Just that Mexican that brings Drew's leather across the border. He's on his way to the factory with another load."

She cut a piece of bread, laid the knife on the table, then subsided listlessly into her own chair. Jim's fingers groped as he twisted in his chair. He got hold of the knife, slipped it behind a rope that went under the chair. The rope parted and he stood up suddenly.

Just like that, it had come to him what these kids were doing. That cart load of hides going by had been the last piece of the jig-saw puzzle to slide into place. He knew now, and it was as if that table knife had slid into his own vitals, twisting cruelly. His face was a gray mask as he turned his back on the startled girl. "Untie me!" he ordered in a voice that was a hoarse croak. "Don't you know Chuck may be murdered?"

Her fumbling fingers undid the rope and his hands came free. He turned, gave her a swift, hard embrace. She stared at his agonized features and a dry sob shook her. "We hoped we could keep you from finding out," she whispered brokenly. "Oh, Dad!"

He kissed her cold lips and went out into the yard, closing the door softly behind him.

From the barn doorway he could see across the sprawled town to Drew's little factory, nearly half a mile. The business Jim had been so proud of—perverted into the rottenest business in the world! Even as he stared, his eyes reddened, he saw the Mexican's cart pull up to the side of the factory, drive right on through the big doorway toward the rear, where they always unloaded. The door swung down into place behind the cart, with a grim and final air.

Jim got on the horse Chuck had furnished for him, rode fast down back alleys. The town was stirring to life sleepily. It would be an hour yet before the Mexican workers would head for the factory for their day's work. Probably no one would think of disturbing old Manuel Chavez in his tiny shack set apart from the rest. They would all know he had worked late last night. What a devilish thing it was!

Jim left his horse behind the feed store,

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where Chuck's horse was already patiently standing.

He didn't minimize the danger. Horville had been killed, so had Chavez. And where was Chuck? A spasm jerked his tired old body as he let himself silently into a small door leading directly off the alley. He closed it behind him and hesitated, getting his eyes used to the gloom of the small storeroom. The odor of leathers and oil and beeswax were strong in his nostrils. Smells he had always loved. He hated them now, with a vehemence that went deep. He slid open the sliding door of the storeroom, his .45 in his hand now. From the front of the big factory room came the rattle of equipment. But a partition separated the room into two sections.

Jim stepped out cautiously—and nearly stumbled over the body. Horror prickled at his senses as he stared down at the bloody head of the Mexican cart driver. The killers had callously left him lying there, where he had toppled from the seat of the cart. Jim's gaze went briefly to the piled hides in the cart. He noted with amazement that two or three of the tanned hides had been dragged to the floor, and a crescent-shaped piece had been slashed from each one.

He stepped over the Mexican's body, crept toward the partition. His nerves jangled weirdly. Where in the hell was Chuck? The buzz of the stitchee up front sounded like an ominous warning. The sheriff's imagination conjured up pictures of the redheaded cowboy lying, like the Mexican, with his head bashed in. He was preparing to slip around the edge of the partition when a scuffling step behind roused him. He whirled, cat-like.

Then the gun slipped from his fingers, dropped to the floor. He was covered adequately by a big gun in the hands of Drew Wilson.

Drew coughed apologetically. There was an ugliness in his features that Jim had never seen there before. He had been too blind. He just stood there, frozen.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Jim," Drew whispered gratingly. He smiled, but it was a ghastly grimace. "Sorry!" he whispered again. The gun came up, steadied, and Drew's finger whitened on the trigger.

This is the end, Jim thought. There

isn't any more. Aloud, he said: "You're the lowest kind of vile thing that ever crawled, Drew. You won't ever get Berry. She's on to you. She was smarter than I was."

△ △ △

"**H**OLD it, Drew!" The brisk snarl came from behind Jim. Wide Hinchell stepped around the partition, and Jim was aware that the sound of the stitcher had ceased. "Don't shoot him, you damn fool!" Hinchell grunted. He took the gun from Drew's shaking hand, flinging him a contemptuous glance. He turned to Jim then, and smiled silkily.

"I want you to know just what a nice set-up we've had, Jim," he remarked smoothly. He gave Jim a shove, then stooped to retrieve the sheriff's gun. Jim was then forced to stumble on around the partition, with Drew trailing behind.

Chuck Cummins was standing near the stitcher, lashed to one of the four-by-four columns that supported the roof of the

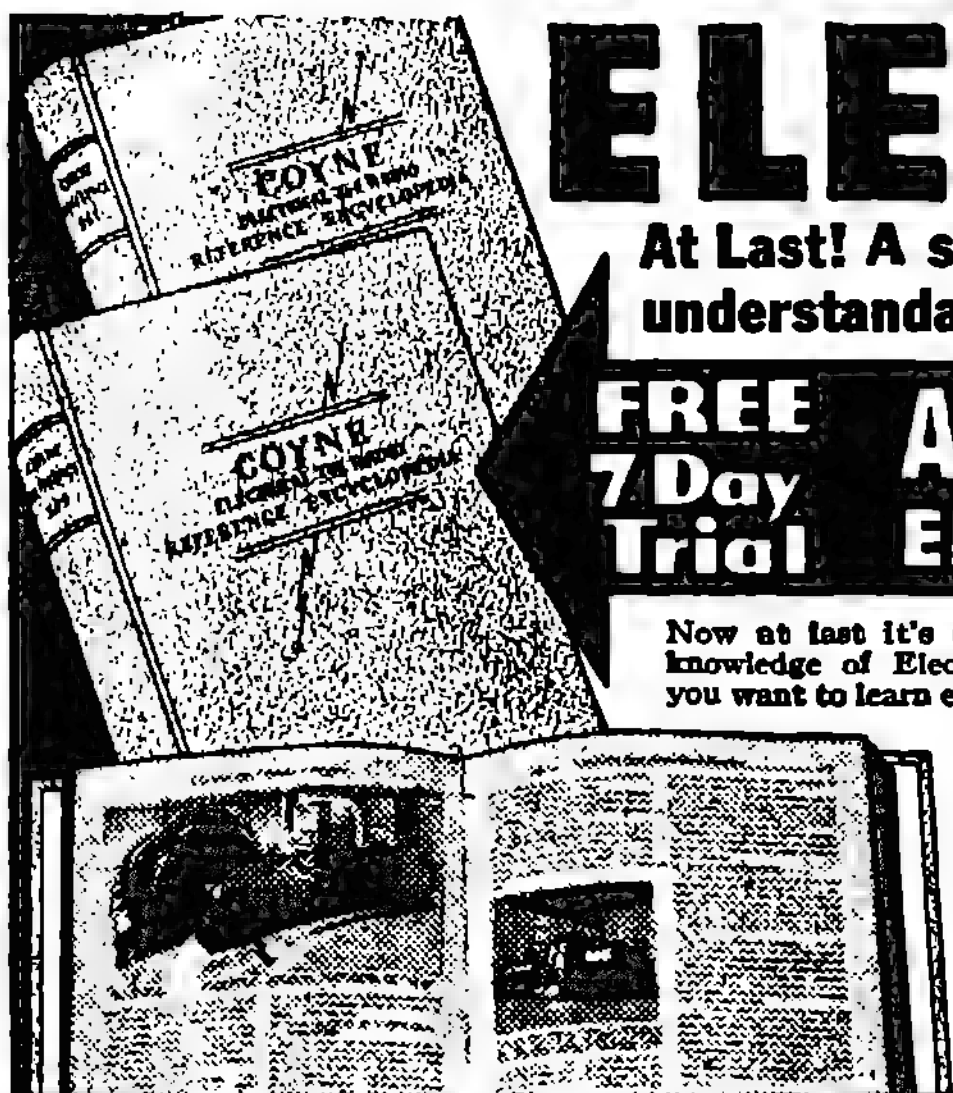
converted barn. His face was white from the pain of ropes drawn too tight into his flesh, but he could grin at Jim.

"We ought to get going, Wide!" Drew almost sobbed. Hinchell smiled coldly, utterly controlled.

"Be twenty minutes until train time," he grunted. "We'll be on it, don't worry. The Mexicans don't come until ten minutes after the train pulls out of Bulltail. What do we care how many dead ones they find—after we're gone? We'll make it look like Cummins and Jim shot each other. Lawman makes sacrifice arresting arch villian—it'll give us practically a clean slate. Clean enough so we can get East and dispose of these."

He picked up one of the belts, showed it to Jim. There was pride in his voice now. "Looks just like a few hundred others Drew was shipping East. But the buyer there wanted one-piece belts. These are split leather, stitched together."

"You don't have to draw a diagram of it," Jim grunted wearily. He wanted to get it over with. "The buyer throws the stitched ones out—and Drew being con-



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veniently on hand back there, obligingly picks them up, promising to replace them with the right belts, by mail. Then you and Drew dispose of the opium these belts are loaded with—between the layers of stitched leather—and collect the cash. Right?"

Hinchell looked so disappointed at not being able to explain it all that Chuck had to laugh. He nodded his head at two or three moon-shaped chunks of leather. "The last shipment got by the eagle-eyes at Jacales this morning, sealed into the hides. They'd just split a thick place on the edge, cram it full, glue it back. Smart. But Horville told me he had figured it out. He wanted to arrest Drew right then, only—I—"

"You had a fight with him about that, eh?" Jim guessed wearily. "Trying to save an old man's feelings. You can only hide a skunk's smell for so long, Chuck. Even from anybody as dumb as I've been."

"This is the last belt," Hinchell grunted, surly now. He reached for the one laying on the stitching plate of the machine.

Jim glanced downward, tensing. His foot was only inches from the foot-pedal of the machine. He lifted his boot, jammed it down hard on the pedal. The sharp needle descended with the lightning speed of a striking rattler, penetrating the back of Hinchell's fat white hand.

Hinchell screamed. Jim Drew's gun roared, the sound rocking the factory room with vibrations. But the sheriff had plummeted his body toward the table, to snatch for one of the guns Hinchell had laid there. Pain burned along his ribs.

Drew Wilson aimed again, point blank at Jim's broad back, as Wide Hinchell ripped his bloody hand out of the machine, still howling with pain. Chuck Cummins raised a leg, shot it out with the force of a driving piston, straight into Drew Wilson's midriff. Drew's gun blared again, harmlessly, as it's owner doubled into a knot.

Wide was clawing for his gun with his left hand, cursing luridly. Jim had his gnarled hand on a gun butt now, and he whirled quickly to face Hinchell. The rancher backed away a pace or two, his

LAWMEN LIVE IN HELL

eyes like glossing coals, hate twisting his face. His gun blazed at the same instant as Jim's did. Jim felt the slug ram into his shoulder, pain blinding him for a second.

Then he saw Hinchell's blocky figure sagging down, to buckle in the middle. Jim swung toward Drew Wilson, as Chuck yelped a sharp warning.

Drew had rolled away from the helpless redhead's lashing boot. He was on his knees now, holding up his gun with both hands. The barrel shook violently and Drew's face was a horrible thing to see.

Jim just waited, his gun sagging. This one last thing he could not bring himself to do. It was too much for his jaded reflexes, torn emotions still twisting within him. He stared into Drew's face, waiting. Maybe he should have let Bob Bookman handle it, after all.

And then the incredible happened. It was just a whispering sound in the air, and a split-second later a knife was buried to the hilt in Drew Wilson's back. Surprise and horror filled his features as his eyes opened wide, then blanked. He pitched forward onto his face, the knife sticking up weirdly, quivering slightly.

From the shadows near the partition came a stumbling, bloody figure. It was the Mexican cart driver, his white teeth flashing as his lips moved painfully. He tried to tell Jim about it, but had to sag down to the floor, holding his head. That Mexican would be a mighty sick man for many days to come, but his heroic return from death's door had turned the trick.

Jim went to Chuck then, untying the knots that held him, with blundering fingers. They stared into each other's faces as they heard Berry Meagan's frantic cry outside, and the hum of many other excited voices as Bulltail folks came running.

"Berry's—," Jim growled softly.

"I know," Chuck whispered. "Thanks, Jim."

THE END

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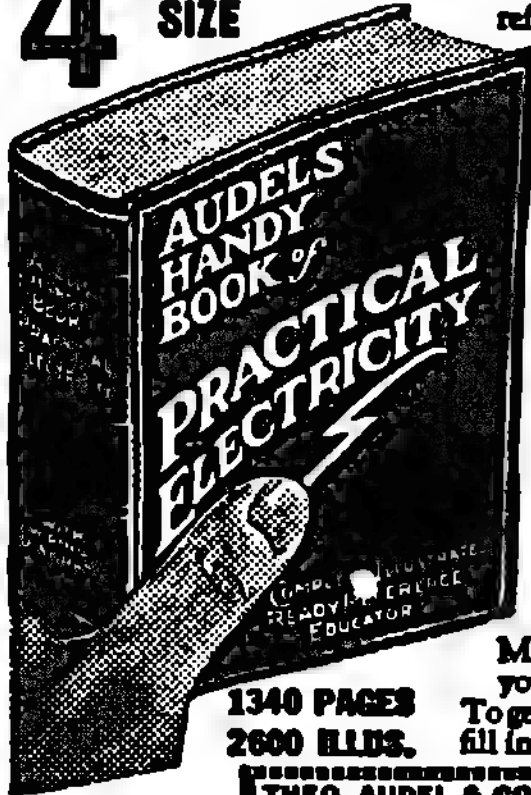


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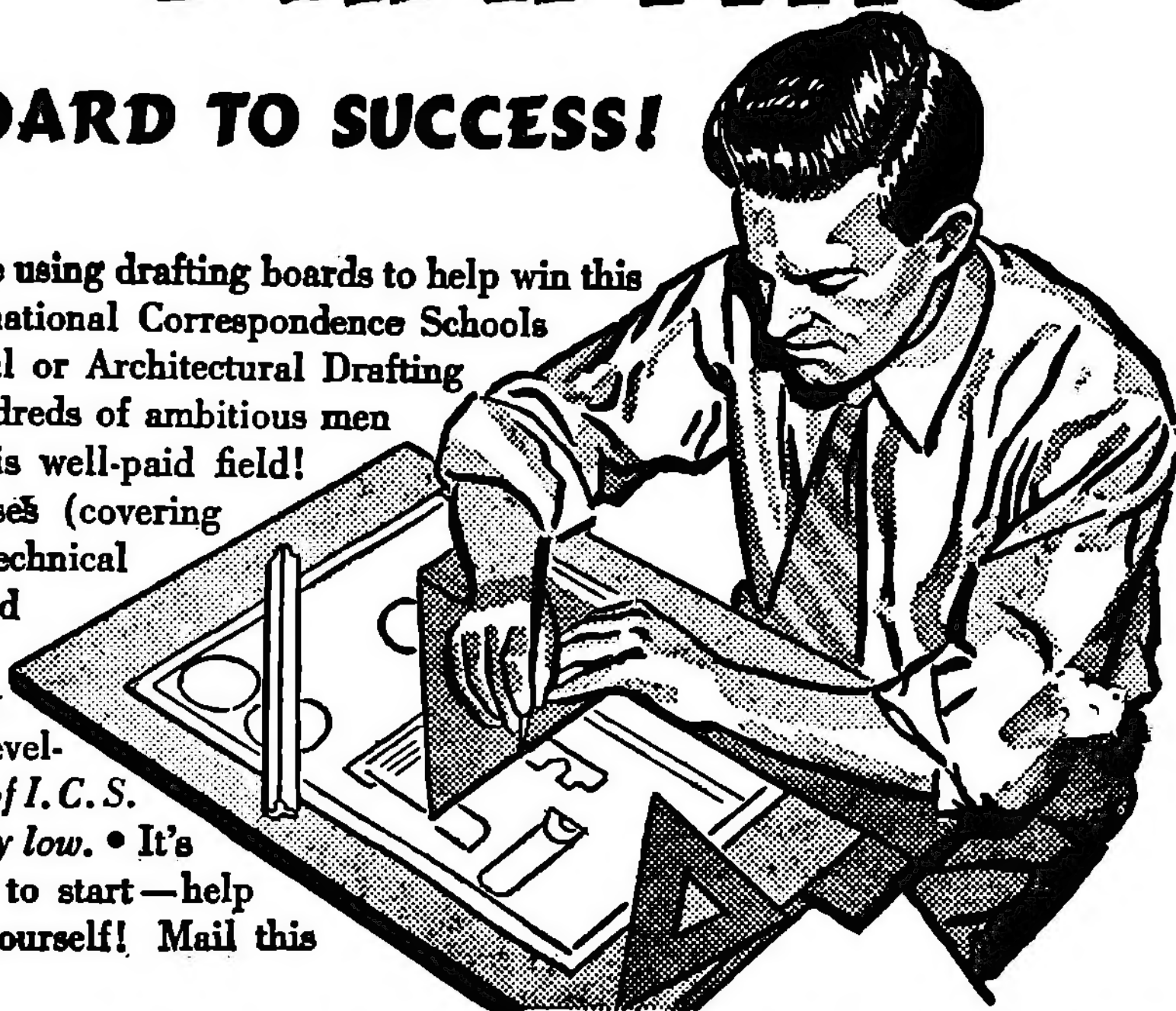


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